Murder!
MARCH, 1957
35 CENTS
NEVER TRUST A MISTRESS!
by Bud Branch
EVERY STORY NEW!
Also: RICHARD DEMING • CHARLES BECKMAN, JR.
ROBERT PLATE • ARNOLD MARMOR • GEORGE LANGE

VOL. 2, NO. 1

MURDER

MARCH, 1957

Cover by O. G. Brabbins

CONTENTS

NOVELETTES

NEVER TRUST A MISTRESS *by Bud Branch* 25

A TIME FOR DYING *by George Lange* 106

SHORT STORIES

THE BLOOD-RED SNOW *by Charles Beckman, Jr.* 1

PAY UP OR ELSE *by Harlan Ellison and Robert Silverberg* .. 16

EXECUTION ON CLOVER STREET *by Edward D. Hoch* .. 22

A GUY NAMED MABEL *by Robert Plate* 47

FAST WITH A GUN *by William Schwartz* 58

THE DEAD GIRL WALKED *by Jason January* 60

VISIT BY NIGHT *by Stuart James* 67

LUKE'S LAST PLAY *by Charles Dixon* 71

THE LONG WAIT *by Arnold Marmor* 81

OFFICE KILLER *by Richard Hardwick* 84

THE CESSPOOL *by Richard Deming* 91

RICHARD E. DECKER, Publisher
WILLIAM MANNERS, Editorial Director
LEONARD COLE, Art Director — NADINE KING, Managing Editor
WILLIAM DONOVAN, Ass't Art Dir. — MARGUERITE BOSTWICK, Asso. Ed.

MURDER Volume 2, Number 1, March 1957. Single copies 35c. Subscriptions $4.00 for twelve issues in the United States and Possessions; elsewhere $5.00 (in U. S. funds) for twelve issues. Published bi-monthly by Fine Art Publications, Inc., 545 Fifth Avenue, New York 17, N. Y. Telephone MU 7-6623. Entered as second-class matter, New York, N. Y. Additional entry at Holyoke, Massachusetts. The entire contents of this issue are copyrighted 1957 by Fine Art Publications, Inc., under the International Copyright Convention. All rights reserved under Inter-American Copyright Convention. Reproduction or use, without express permission, of editorial or pictorial content in any manner is prohibited. Postage must accompany manuscripts if return is desired, but no responsibility will be assumed for unsolicited materials. No similarity between any of the names, characters, persons and/or institutions is intended and any similarity which may exist is purely coincidental. Printed in the U. S. A.

the blood-red snow

"I—I got to go tell the others," Homer said. Somebody in the building was going to be killed. He didn't know who.

BY CHARLES BECKMAN, JR.

Homer Meeker lay on his cot, on the tangled wad of sweat-dampened bed sheets. His room was dark. A neon sign across the street blinked on and off, throwing a garish, green light across the ceiling at regular intervals. Upstairs, the maestro was practicing his concerto. He was at the part with the dark, booming chords that sent chills through Homer.

Tick...tick...tick...tick....

The battered alarm clock went on its steady round.

Now, the hands pointed to nine o'clock.

Soon, they would reach ten o'clock. And at ten o'clock somebody in this house on Brooner Street was going to die.

Homer wiped his hand shakily across his thin, pointed face, smearing the sweat. He dug a finger under his collar, for it was choking him, and stared at the ceiling with frightened, bulging eyes.

at his legs and whispered in a

Tonight, it had been very dark when he cut across the vacant lot. The weeds slapped cold wind. Then the snow started falling, the flakes brushing his face.

Across the vacant lot, he

went, down to the dark alley. Cold here. The thin coat wasn't much protection. Be nice, back at his room. Be there soon.

And then the voice, from nowhere, at first, and then from the alley he was about to enter. Something in the words stopped him. The men were in the alley. He'd seen the bright, moving tips of their cigarettes. And then heard their muttering voices...

"Yeah...Brooner Street. Three-twenty-two. I checked to make sure."

The wind—whistling around a corner, swirling the snow and tossing an old crumpled paper along the gutter—muffled some of the words...

The other man's voice, answering, "And I start shooting at ten o'clock sharp."

"You won't miss. I'll fix it. I know the exact spot—"

The wind again.

"...money. Half now and half after you've done the job. Here..."

A flurry of snow blew in Homer's face and got under his coat collar.

"...murder. I don't take that kind of rap—"

"Don't be a damn fool. It's perfect, I tell you..."

The wind, joining the conversation again, interrupting the words with its moan.

"...right address? Three-twenty-two Brooner...?"

Then the men and their voices were moving away, further down the alley. Their cigarettes flicked into the night, splashed against a brick wall in a shower of sparks and then fell into the snow and smothered.

And Homer was running. He ran faster than he'd ever run before in his life. Only, he wasn't going anywhere. He just ran, falling over his own feet, sucking the cold air into his bursting lungs.

He got out of the dark streets and the alleys, to sidewalks where there were people. And still he was running, bumping into pedestrians, upsetting sign boards, pushing through streams of traffic. Until, finally, he fell gasping, exhausted into a doorway—a pain knifing his side.

Here, at least, there were lights. Here, there were people.

An all night grocery store across the street, ablaze with lights. Beside it, a cinema with zig-zag colored bulbs flashing crazily around the marquee. A penny arcade next to the theater, with its pin ball tables and

shooting gallery, where somebody was popping away with a .22 target gun.

Homer got up shakily. He walked down the street to the tenement section where gray old buildings huddled in the snow like chickens stiff with cold. He went to the building where he worked as janitor and lived.

To three twenty-two Brooner Street, where, at ten o'clock tonight, somebody was going to die...

To anyone else, they would just have been scattered words, tossed around by a night wind. Words to be shrugged off, forgotten.

But to a guy like Homer, they meant *Death.*

He'd heard such words spoken between tight-lipped men with hard eyes when he'd worked for the crime syndicate. And in the pen, he'd heard the same kind of words, whispered, and later a con would be found in the washroom stabbed to death with a home-made knife.

They were words making a bargain for murder.

Homer sat on the edge of his cot and stared around the dark room with bulging eyes. A trickle of sweat coursed down his face although the room was cold, and his body shivered.

Upstairs, the maestro was playing over again the difficult part of the concerto. Old, deaf Mrs. Hanson on the second floor had her radio going. The young couple in the room next to his were laughing about something that was funny to the very young in love. And above him, beautiful Jocelyn practiced her pirouettes on her slim dancer's legs.

His friends, and one of them was marked for death.

How could he stop this awful thing?

The police?

"So you say you heard some men plotting to murder somebody in the building where you work as janitor? Let's see, your name is Homer Meeker. Yeah. We have your record here. Ex-con, out on parole. Did a ten year stretch for armed robbery. So you been hanging around your old crowd again. Guess the parole board will be interested to hear that. Oh, you just overheard these guys talking in an alley. Sure that's the way it was, Homer Meeker? Really sure? Or were you mixed up in it, and lost your nerve? Maybe we better put you away again to be sure...

No, the police weren't for guys like him. They wouldn't believe him anyway.

He arose shakily and walked out of his little room and up the stairway. It was an old building that creaked in the wind and smelled of age and decaying hope. It housed theater and show people down on their luck—the "has-beens", the hopeful "will-be's," and the "never-wases."

But they were nice people. They treated him just like any other guy, instead of like an ex-con out on parole.

Which one of them should he warn? Which one would be the target for murder? He thought about what he knew of their lives. "Jocelyn!" he whispered. aloud. "She was havin' trouble with that guy that keeps chasin' her."

He stood outside Jocelyn's room, wiped his palms on his trouser legs, and then tapped on her door. She would be practicing her ballet, he knew. All day, she practiced. Sometimes late at night, too. She was going to be a great ballerina, she'd told him over and over with a bright light in her eyes.

Homer closed his eyes. "She'll have on her red dancing costume and the paper flower will be in her hair." Imagining her and how she was dressed was a game he sometimes played.

She opened the door. Her face was flushed and she was breathing hard. She was wearing her red tights and there was a paper gardenia in her dark hair.

"Homer!" she exclaimed as though delighted to see him. She wiped the back of her hand across her damp forehead and smiled. "Come in."

He shuffled into the room, an old-fashioned room with high ceilings, heavy woodwork and sagging wallpaper that was splotched with a faded green and red floral design. Jocelyn cooked on the hot plate beside the sink, hung her few, poor dresses behind the yellow chintz curtain in the corner, and stretched her long, bare legs on the home-made ballet bar by the hour.

The bar was a piece of one inch pipe that Homer had fastened up on the wall for her.

She'd showed him, once, how she raised her foot to the high bar in practiced, graceful movements. The *pied' a' terre, pied a' quart, pied sur la demi-pointe,* and *pied sur la pointe.*

She gave each movement its name as she did it.

"Homer," she told him now, "thank you for the little pot of ivy. It makes the room so much brighter." She walked flatfootedly across the room in her ballet slippers, to the ivy on the table. There, she gave a little hop that brought her up on her toes, and then whirled around the table.

Homer had put the ivy in her room earlier that day, while she was out. He'd put some in everybody's room. Today was his birthday. He was thirty years old. But since he didn't have anybody to give him a present, he'd gone down to the five-and-ten and bought the ivy and then put some in each and every room. He did it not only because it was his birthday, but because it was good to be alive again and free to walk in the streets away from the gray stone walls. It didn't bother him too much that nobody knew this was his birthday.

The record on Jocelyn's battered portable player was still turning. She'd played this ballet over so many times you could hardly hear it for the needle scratch.

Once, when he was fixing the radiator, she'd told him the story of the ballet. It was all about a poor girl who lived with some rich, ugly step sisters. They kept telling her how ugly she was, because they were jealous, until she believed it herself. She'd therefore run and hide when anyone came to visit them. Then, one day, a handsome prince caught her and kissed her. He gave her a looking glass and she saw that she was beautiful. She thought he'd cast a spell—but she had really been beautiful all along. She just needed someone to tell her she was.

It was a nice story. And Homer was pleased that Jocelyn had bothered to tell it to him.

He wished somebody would cast a spell over him and turn him from a skinny, stoop shouldered weasel into a big handsome guy. Then he'd tell Miss Jocelyn he was in love with her. He guessed she was about the most beautiful girl who ever lived.

But he didn't think about that now. He looked at the clock on Jocelyn's table. The hands pointed to ten minutes after nine.

The sweat came out on his face again, in big fat blobs.

"Miss Jocelyn," he said.

"You remember you told me about that fellow that wanted to marry you? The rich guy you ran away from?"

She stood flat footed. Her dark brows came together. "Yes. Why, Homer?"

"Tick...tick...tick... tick," said the clock.

"Has—has he been botherin' you any more?"

"Oh." She shrugged. "He phones every day. I always refuse to talk to him." She made a distasteful grimace with her mouth. "He's real sloppy looking and twice my age."

Homer wiped his hand across his face. "You—you reckon he might want to kill you?"

The room became very still. Everything held its breath, everything except the scratching record player and the clock that went, *"Tick...tick... tick...."*

She looked at him very strangely. "Homer, why would you say anything like that?"

"I can't explain exactly," he blurted, "but I heard a man pay another man some money to shoot somebody in this building at ten o'clock tonight. I don't know who it'll be. But I want you to be careful."

Her eyes flew wide open. They stood looking at each other across the room. The girl clasped her hands over her arms with a little shiver, still staring at him with the wide eyes.

"I—I got to go tell the others," Homer said. "You keep your door locked and stay away from the window."

Homer was out in the hall again, going up the creaking stairs. It was cold in the hall and on the stairway. Outside, the winter wind moaned and threw snow against the windows.

A picture suddenly flashed in Homer's mind, just for a second, then it was gone. It was like getting a glimpse of something, but not long enough to remember all the details.

Two figures walking through the snow. Down a dark alley. A neon sign flashed the word, "Cat." Then one of the figures sank into the snow, and where he was lying, the snow turned red.

Homer stood frozen on the stairs, staring straight ahead. It had happened again.

In his cell, at prison, this thing had occured several times. He'd suddenly get a premonition that something was going to take place. Then a kind of shadowy picture

would flash across his mind. Once, he saw a guard beating him. Sure enough, a half hour later one of the guards did go berserk and nearly knocked his head off.

Another time, in this funny part of his mind, he saw a prison riot coming. It warned him just in time, for bullets started flying.

Homer had read up on this thing in psychology books in the prison library. They had a technical word for it: "extra-sensory perception." Usually, it went by better known names: premonitions, intuition or hunches. This kind of thing happened most often to quiet, lonely people who lived a lot inside themselves.

He'd tried to tell Big Mike about his ability to catch these glimpses of an event before it really happened, but Big Mike only scoffed and told him to shut up. "You're goin' stir crazy, you little weasel," Big Mike would say, and kick him.

Big Mike never had thought much of Homer as a cell mate.

Now it had happened again. Maybe he *had* gone a little stir-batty in those ten years he'd spent at Sing-Sing. It scared him to see things in his mind like he just had. Especially tonight, after hearing what he'd heard in the alley.

Up the stairs. Hurry now. Time's rushing by and there are lots of people in this building.

Would they believe him? Or would they think he was a stir-crazy little loon, like Big Mike always said.

Miss Jocelyn had looked frightened, as if she believed him all right. But maybe she'd been merely afraid of him, thinking he'd blown his top.

They *had* to believe him. They were his friends, these people. They were good to him and he didn't want anything to happen to any of them.

Who should he warn next? He had come to know the lives of these people pretty well since he'd been working as janitor in the building. The more he thought about them, the more he realized that any one of them might be a potential murder victim.

This guy who pestered Jocelyn so much, maybe he'd finally gone nutty with frustration and decided if he couldn't have her, neither could anybody else. That kind of thing happened. Then there was the Maestro, the piano player. He'd had a terrible row with his brother

who claimed the Maestro had stolen a composition from him years ago and was still getting royalties from it. Or, the young couple downstairs, the Wilsons, who did the skating act when they could get some booking. Just yesterday, the husband, young Jack Wilson, had beat up a loan shark who'd been around pestering his wife about a past due bill. This loan shark was a pretty mean guy. Homer knew his reputation.

Even old Mrs. Hanson, the hard-of-hearing lady on the second floor, had her troubles. Back in the days of vaudeville, she'd salted away a small nest egg. It wasn't much, but it was all she now had to live on. Her only relative, a lazy nephew, kept pestering her for money. He was a wino and never did a lick of work. When she died, he'd inherit her money. And he was the kind of guy who might have the nice old lady murdered just to get his hands on the money sooner.

Well, he'd just have to warn all of them.

He knocked on the Maestro's door. The old musician's name was really Oscar Ursprung, but he liked to be called the Maestro. Once, he had been a great concert pianist. But that was years ago. He'd got to hitting the bottle too heavily and finally could get no more concert engagements. Now he lived on a small pension and practiced for his next concert—which he would never give.

He broke off in the middle of a great, rolling cadenza. In a moment the door opened and he stood there, a little, stooped man with a red nose, a white mustache and goatee and a great shock of white hair that stood straight up on end.

"Ach, Homer." He patted Homer on the shoulder with a flourish. "It iss goot dot you come. The radiator. Again dot *verdamte* thing don't vork. My hands are stiff mit coldt."

"Later, Maestro." Homer swallowed and tried to keep his teeth from chattering. "Look, there's something I got to tell you."

They went into the old musician's room. Homer told him swiftly what he'd heard in the alley.

Ursprung was furious. He stomped around the room waving his hands. "Dot *verdamte* Carl. So now he's going to haff me murdered, eh?"

"Maybe it wasn't you, Maestro. Maybe it wasn't your

brother I heard. But somebody in this house is really on the spot tonight and it *could* be you. So be careful, huh?"

Then he was out in the hall again, running to another door.

Fine birthday he was having.

Happy birthday, Homer. Might as well wish himself a happy birthday. Nobody else was going to. And somebody was fixing to give him a corpse for a birthday present.

Mrs. Hanson was a white-haired little lady. She had a shawl around her bent shoulders. The radio was on, loud, and her scrap book was open on the table under the lamp. She spent every evening this way, playing the radio and dreaming over her scrap book of the days she played the Keith circuit.

"Homer, I'm sorry I can't hear you. I misplaced my hearing aid again. I've looked everywhere—"

One of those pictures flashed in Homer's mind. He saw her leaning over her cedar chest and taking out the hearing device.

He told her to look behind her cedar chest.

She peered back of it and exclaimed, "Why, there's the thing. I declare, Homer, you're a marvel at finding things." She adjusted the hearing aid and then asked him what he wanted.

Swiftly, he gave her the same warning he'd given Jocelyn and the Maestro.

He glanced at his watch. It was now just twenty five minutes to ten.

His stomach twisted into a cold, hard knot. There was an aching sensation behind his eyes. His heart was going like a piston.

Hurry, Homer. There isn't much more time.

He knocked on the young Wilson couple's door. Jack opened it. There was a lipstick smear on his cheek. Homer began his spiel again, and Jack looked surprised and then scared. By the time Homer finished, the freckles were standing out on Jack Wilson's face like a sprinkling of cinnamon on pasty bread dough.

Homer went next to the room of Eustace Holyweather, the Shakespearian actor, and then across the hall to Sally La Verne, the blonde stripper.

Finally, he'd completed his rounds and stood outside his own door, wiping his face with a handkerchief.

Well, there wasn't anything

more he could do now.

He opened his door, but stood motionless on the threshold.

A man was in his room, sitting in a chair and with his feet on the table. He was a big man. He was smoking a cigar and had his overcoat on and a felt hat tipped back on his head.

Homer blinked twice before he could make himself believe it. "Big Mike!" he exclaimed.

"Hello, Weasel," Big Mike said.

That's what Big Mike had called him for ten years. "Weasel."

Homer went into the room, closing the door behind him. "Well, gee," he said, "it's—it's nice to see you, Big Mike. But I thought you weren't eligible for parole for three years, yet."

"I ain't." Big Mike sucked lovingly at the cigar. Then he spit on Homer's nice clean linoleum floor. He grinned. "I busted my way out, Weasel."

"I'll be damned," Homer gasped. Then he swallowed a sudden panic in his throat. "Well, it's sure nice to see you again, Big Mike. But I'm still on probation. If they catch you here—"

"Don't let it worry you, Weasel. I ain't sticking around these parts any longer than necessary. I just want one thing. My half of the fifty grand. Then I'm heading for Mexico."

"Oh."

Yeah, the fifty grand. The money they had stashed away after that bank robbery ten years ago, the robbery that Homer had been in with Big Mike, that got him sent up for ten long years. It seemed like a long time ago now, and kind of unreal, like a dream. Homer had been a skinny kid out of the slums and without much sense. He knew better now.

But the money they'd stolen was still safely hidden, theirs if they wanted it. Big Mike used to talk about it for hours at night in their cell. The things he was going to do with it after he got out. Homer had gotten so he didn't care much about the money any more. He'd just wanted to be free to breathe clean air and walk the streets again and maybe get a job and start life over.

Big Mike used to try by the hour to get Homer to tell where the money was hidden. Homer would have been glad to tell him, just to stop Big Mike from nagging at him about it,

but he honestly couldn't. It had been dark that night after the robbery. The cops were chasing him and guns were popping and bullets were howling all over the place. Somehow, in the scuffle, Homer had found the suitcase with the money in his hands. They'd split up, Mike running down one alley, Homer ducking down another. Afterwards, Homer couldn't for the life of him remember the alley down which he'd run. But that night, he'd found the loose bricks in this wall and shoved the suitcase in the hole made when they were taken out and put the bricks back into place before the cops reached him.

Homer never would tell the police where he'd hidden the money, although he signed a confession to the robbery. He was afraid of what Big Mike would do to him if he told where the money was hidden.

Big Mike was mad enough about the confession. Homer hadn't meant to squeal on Big Mike. But the cops knew Big Mike was in on the robbery although they hadn't any proof. So they told Homer that Big Mike had confessed anyway, and Homer should therefore put in the confession he signed that Big Mike was his partner in the bank robbery.

Afterwards, Homer tried to make Big Mike understand that it had been a dirty trick the cops pulled on him, but Big Mike always insisted it was Homer that got him sent up. And he thought Homer was trying to hold onto all the dough; that was why he refused to tell where the money was hidden.

Homer tried unsuccessfully to convince Big Mike that although he couldn't explain how to get to the alley where the money was hidden, he could find it again himself.

Now Big Mike glowered at him. "I don't suppose you've went and got that money and spent it all on yourself, Weasel? You wouldn't do anything selfish like that after all the nice things Big Mike's done for you?"

"Of course not," Homer told him. "The money's still where I told you I hid it. In that brick wall."

"Okay." Big Mike took his feet off the table. "Let's go get it."

Homer put on his thin coat. All he wanted was to give Big Mike the money and get rid of him in a hurry. If the parole board caught him sheltering an

escaped con, they'd send him back for the rest of the eight years in his sentence.

They went out together into the cold night.

Homer looked back at the big house on Brooner Street. He felt a little like a traitor, leaving it tonight when trouble was heading its way. But there wasn't much more he could do than warn the people, and he'd done that. And if there was going to be some shooting there, he didn't want the cops swarming over the place and finding Big Mike in his room.

The wind pierced Homer's thin coat. The snow swirled in his face.

They crossed empty lots, walked down back streets and alleys. At last, they came to the place.

Homer pushed a garbage can aside and felt around the wall behind it. Big Mike was excited, swearing at him and urging him to hurry.

Finally, Homer found the loose bricks. He pulled them out and sure enough, there the suitcase was after ten years.

Big Mike shoved Homer out of the way and worked the suitcase out of its hiding place. With trembling fingers he released the catch and felt inside the suitcase to make sure the money was still there.

"We'll go where there's some light, so we can split the dough," Big Mike said. "Then I'll be leaving."

Homer didn't know how to tell Big Mike that he didn't care anything about the money any more. He just wanted to keep working for his new friends at the Brooner Street house. But Big Mike would get suspicious of some trick, and maybe be mad, if he refused the money. So he'd take it. Perhaps, later on, he'd put it in a plain envelope and send it back to the bank from which they'd stolen it.

They walked together through the alleys, across a vacant lot, toward the part of town where the lights were.

They headed toward the all-night grocery, the theater with the zig-zag lights flashing across the marquee, the penny arcade and shooting gallery.

They passed through an alley behind these places. Big Mike glanced at his wrist watch. Then he lagged behind. "Got a loose shoe lace." He bent to tie it. "You go on, Weasel. I'll catch up with you."

Somewhere, a clock began striking the hour of ten with

deep-throated "bongs."

Homer walked on. Between the buildings, on another street, a neon sign above a bar flashed. *"Black Cat Bar,"* it blinked.

"... t h r e e ... four ..." chimed the clock.

Then a billboard cut off part of the sign from Homer's view, so only the word *"Cat"* winked at him like a green, luminous eye.

"...five..."

Homer suddenly stood very still. The hairs on the back of his neck began prickling.

"...six..."

The picture flashed again in his mind—the one he had seen as he'd walked up the stairs of the Brooner Street house.

Two figures walking through the snow. Down a dark alley. A neon sign flashed the word "Cat." Then one of the figures sank into the snow, and where he was lying, the snow turned red.

It was almost ten o'clock and suddenly Homer knew who, in the Brooner Street house, was scheduled to die tonight. He, himself—Homer Meeker!

The inside of his mouth turned into dry cotton. A scream worked up into his throat, but got lodged there. He turned and started to run.

"...seven..."

Big Mike, bulky and dark in the shadows, blocked his way. His voice came out of the night, a hoarse whisper, "Go on, Weasel. Keep on walking down the alley."

Homer swallowed painfully. "No," he gasped.

"Go on!" Big Mike ordered.

But Homer stood his ground, rooted there.

"...eight..." chimed the clock.

The big man came at him like a football lineman, ramming a mountainous shoulder into him, forcing him back down the alley.

The clock was booming its last strokes.

Homer suddenly pivoted, and with all his strength gave Big Mike a shove. Caught off balance, Big Mike went tripping forward on his toes, swinging his arms in a frantic effort to regain his balance, his momentum carrying him to the back of the penny arcade.

"...ten..." t o l l e d the booming clock.

Inside the arcade, in the shooting gallery, a .22 repeating target rifle let fly a fusilade of bullets. Boards on the back of the building splintered. Big

Mike jerked erect. He went around in a funny little tripping dance on the balls of his feet. He pointed a finger at Homer. His mouth opened. Then he crashed into the snow.

And in the dark alley where he was sprawled, the snow gradually turned red while over on another street a green neon sign flashed the word "Cat" over and over...

Homer went through a door that led into the rear of the shooting gallery to see how Big Mike had worked it. It was pretty simple. He'd slipped in and removed the bags of sand from behind the target screen before going over to Homer's room. The bullets, consequently, went through the screen and the thin boards in back of the place and raked the alley. Anyone walking behind those boards would be cut down.

Big Mike had paid the guy to come into the shooting gallery and bang away at the screen with one of the target guns at exactly ten o'clock. All it took on Big Mike's part was a little timing to have Homer walk past there at the right moment; then he wouldn't have to split the money in the suitcase. And when Homer's body was found in the alley it would look like an accident. Somebody, the cops would think, had thoughtlessly removed the sand bags that stopped the shooting gallery bullets. They weren't likely to suspect it had been murder.

Homer walked around to the front of the place. A man was just leaving. He turned his coat collar up and disappeared in the night. Big Mike's executioner. He'd never get the other half of the money Big Mike had promised him.

Homer started lugging the suitcase back to his room. The stolen money spelled bad luck. He didn't want any part of it. Tomorrow he'd figure some way of getting it back to the bank.

When he entered the house on Brooner Street, the Maestro leaned over the stair rail on the third floor.

"Homer!" he boomed. "Ven vill you fix dis *verdamte* radiator?"

"Coming right now!" Homer yelled back.

He put the bag under the cot in his room, made certain it was out of sight. He then hurried up the stairs.

He opened the Maestro's door. And stood there, his mouth agape. Everybody in the

Brooner Street house had assembled in the Maestro's room. The young Wilson couple, Mrs. Hanson, Mr. Holyweather, Sally La Verne the platinum blonde stripper. And most important, Jocelyn.

The Maestro started playing, "Happy Birthday," and they all joined in, singing and laughing. Then they sang, "Freez a Jolly Good Feller!" And Homer realized, with his eyes full of tears, that they were singing it for him.

It was the first birthday party he'd had in his whole life.

Later, they explained that Mrs. Hanson had plotted with the rest of them to give him his party. He'd forgotten that he'd mentioned to her that he was going to be thirty on that day.

"Ve all vaited around until after ten," the Maestro chuckled. "Und nobody vass shodt. Maybe your imagination vass goink offer t i m e, Homer? Aboudt somebody gettink murdered?"

"I—I guess so," Homer admitted, thinking of Big Mike lying on the red snow.

● ● ●

DIVORCE ACTION

After considerable arguing as they drove along, Mrs. Ed Freitas, driver of the car, told her husband she wanted a divorce.

"That's all right with me," snapped her spouse angrily, "I'm getting out right now!" Even though the car was going 35 miles per hour, he opened the door and stepped out.

When the sheriff's office responded to Mrs. Freitas' call, they found her husband unconscious by the road.

I left the ship early Friday morning, just after we'd docked. The sun was coming up over the Palisades, and the Hudson lay dirty and swollen beside the docks.

My duffle was heavier than usual, but that didn't bother me even though I knew I had to shoulder it all the way uptown on the subway.

My duffle was heavier than usual because I had Willie in there. Willie the cabin boy—and a tightly-knotted rope around his throat.

He didn't weigh much, even as cabin boys go, but I felt his head banging against my rear at every step, and I didn't like it.

I hit off down the dirty street toward the subway, poor Willie getting heavier with every step. I gave the man in the change booth some nickels, got a token, dropped it in, and grabbed the uptown express. That time of day, the express wasn't much crowded. I wondered how long it would be before Willie would start to stink.

I slouched in a corner of the car, my duffle propped between my legs in front of me, and tried to remember what Willie had looked like. My memory of him was starting to blur already—and it hadn't been more than an hour since I'd let him have it. All I could remember of his face were the sharp cheekbones and the big, wide staring eyes that looked older than Willie's twenty-

pay up or else

BY

HARLAN ELLISON AND ROBERT SILVERBERG

My duffle was heavier than usual when I left ship because I had Willie in there, a tightly-knotted rope around his throat.

eight years. Eyes that had seen too much, that afternoon off Paramaribo in First Mate Crayeley's cabin. The eyes that had bugged like swollen grapes when I got the hawser around his throat.

Poor Willie. But five hundred is five hundred, and Miss Laura had asked awfully nice. I'd do things for her I wouldn't do for her husband, Captain or no Captain. She's all right, Laura. And a hot-lookin' dish she is, too. And if she didn't want the old man to know what she'd been doing with Crayeley, I didn't mind helping her out—for five hundred.

The car rattled along uptown, and I figured 116th was about right. If I carried him down across the Drive and dumped him off the breakwater with a few rocks in the duffle bag, he wouldn't come up till long after the fishes had eaten out his eyes.

I settled back and stared at the subway car's ceiling. It was hot. Even damned hot for July. The fans clattered noisily. When the car stopped, I opened one eye to see if any good-looking women got on. Their summer dresses blew up prettily with the fans going.

But none got on, and the car rolled again. I settled back with my eyes closed once more. Man! Am I desperate, I thought idly, to need a cheap thrill like that! But six weeks on the ship without a woman was hard on a guy like me. No women, that is, except Laura.

With my eyes shut I could picture her real easy. The high forehead and gold-flecked eyes. The copper hair blowing in the wind on the foredeck. The breeze and salt spray plastering the thin dress tight against her lush body. The firm thighs and full, high breasts. My mouth dried out, and I tried to put her from my mind.

Her trips on the ship had been infrequent. Too infrequent. I guess because she was getting it from the First Mate on shore when the ship was in. Only when it got tough on her did she come aboard.

Oh well, *I* wasn't going to get any of that. She was pretty careful who she handed it out to. Crayeley, maybe. but not a slummer like me. Pity Willie'd seen her and threatened to tell the Captain. If he'd stayed out of there, not been so nosey, not asked for money to keep quiet, he'd still be walking the decks.

And I wouldn't get five hundred.

Five hundred wasn't much—but it was all a shipmate like Willie was worth to a guy like me.

I carried him down the hill past the resident hotels, away from Broadway, and over the Hudson River Parkway. It took me fifteen minutes to get across—those damned commuters speed that road like maniacs, and close together as pig's knuckles in a barrel. I walked across the little patch of heat-scorched grass and down the rocks.

It took me two minutes, and I was blocked off from the road by the slope of the breakwater.

I laid Willie on his side and gave him a healthy kick with my boot. He went slipping and rolling down the incline, disappeared with a tiny splash into the black, dead-fish laden water.

" 'Bye, shipmate," I said, watching the ripples spread.

Now for the five hundred. A call to Laura at her apartment, and I was off to the pleasures of the big city.

I walked back up the hill to a drug store, whistling.

I dialed, then listened to the phone ringing, once, twice, heard Laura's soft, husky voice saying, "Hello."

"Hi," I said. "It's me. Jack."

"Jack? What Jack?"

"*Jack,*" I said. "From the *Betsy B.* You remember me, Mrs. Sefton, don't you?"

She sounded mystified. "No, I can't say that I do. Who did you say you were? From the ship?"

I looked cautiously around the drug store. The next booth was empty. Good. I didn't want any extra ears.

"You remember me," I told her. "I had to wait till we docked so they'd think he went ashore and never came back. You owe me five hundred bucks. *Now* do you remember?"

"Oh!" she said, very softly.

"Oh," I mimicked. "Yeah. Willie, remember? I've done the job, and I want to collect. Now how about it?"

There was a long silence at the other end. I drummed impatiently on the stipled walls of the phone booth.

"I can't hear you, Mrs. Sefton."

"There's—there's a difficulty..." she said hoarsely. "I—I can't pay you just now... *Jack.*"

Now it was my time to be quiet for awhile.

"I just don't have the cash," she went on. "I'm sorry I asked you—"

"*You're* sorry? *You're* sorry? What about me, who bumped off some guy I hardly knew, to keep your pretty pink undies clean? What about my five hundred bucks?"

"Please deposit five cents for the next three minutes," the operator said sweetly.

I swore and dropped a nickel in. "Where's my five hundred?" I asked again. "Come on, speak up!"

"I don't have it," she said. "Please stop bothering me or I'll call the police." There was a click on the other end as the receiver went down.

I swore again. I wished I hadn't thrown that extra nickel in—good money after bad. I got out of the phone booth and stood undecided for a moment. Then I headed out into the street, clenching and unclenching my fists.

Maybe she was going to run rings around Old Man Sefton —but *I* wasn't going to put up with a run-around.

I knocked. "Laura?" I said.

"Yes? Who's there?"

"Crayeley," I said, muttering it to disguise my voice.

She opened the door, but immediately started to swing it shut on me. I forced my way in.

I stood with my back flat against the door. I grinned. "Hello, Mrs. Sefton. Laura."

I stared at her. She was pale, but still gorgeous. Her satin dressing-gown had fallen partly open, and I saw the milky-white rise of her breasts. Her belly was flat and flowed beautifully into rich thighs. She had long legs that were real class.

She caught my stare and the red flowed up from her breasts, right past her neck. and suffused her face. She drew the robe closer, and belted it tightly. "What do you want?" she asked as she backed up.

"Five hundred bucks," I said amiably. "That's all. Just five hundred."

"I don't have it," she said. "I told you—"

"I've heard that song before." I folded my arms. "Look, don't go making deals if you can't back them up. I got you off the hook with Willie, but I didn't do it for exercise."

"My husband doesn't let me have much cash," she said

weakly. "I'm sorry if I—"

"I'm sorrier," I snapped. I strode inside and looked around. "Nice place you've got here," I said. A muscle in my cheek was twitching. If Sefton walked in now, I'd really have had it. I felt the thick, modern curtains. "Real slick little home, you and the Old Man."

I whirled and looked at her. She was white-faced, arms crossed over those full breasts, copper hair glinting brightly.

"It'd be a real shame," I said, "if the Old Man decided to kick you out of here on your pretty little butt, you know."

"What do you mean?"

I smiled pleasantly. "I want the five hundred," I said. "If I don't get it, I'll spill it all to your husband about the pleasant afternoon you spent in Crayeley's cabin. I know the old boy is broadminded, but he draws the line at cutting in the First Mate on what you've got to offer. How's that?"

She came closer to me. Closer, till her jutting breasts touched my shirt. My back suddenly felt as though it had been greased with burning oil. I began to sweat. I could smell the musky perfume she had on, and the closeness of her hurt me. "I don't have the cash," she said for what seemed like the fiftieth time. Her lower lip slid out in a little-girl pout.

"Don't kid me with that sweet innocence act," I said. "You're not foolin' anybody. And you don't have any suckers around to knock me off, the way I gave it to Willie."

"I—I—can't get it up," she said.

"You'll get it up," I said, getting nastier. Then a thought came to me, and I added, "One way or the other. Money ain't everything."

She stared at me blankly. Then a dawning light came into her beautiful gold-flecked eyes, and she drew in a breath sharply.

"I can't!" she gasped. "I can't! I won't!"

"Oh, but you will. Because you got the same problem as before. Only Willie wasn't too smart. I am. You'll pay up—like I say, one way or another..."

I took off my cap and threw it on the table. I moved toward her, and she pressed the back of her hand to her mouth. She was twice as exciting-looking that way. A feeble little, "I can't get it up..." came out of her.

Well, the Captain's lady

didn't used to come on many voyages with her husband. Now she comes on every trip, closes up her swank apartment and comes along. Captain Sefton thinks it's because she wants to be close to him.

I'm just a belowdecks swabber and five hundred is a lot of dough, but you know, even if she offered the five hundred to me now...I don't think I'd take it.

FOOTPRINTS IN WHITE

When four men broke into a box car and stole a number of straw hats, Railroad Special agent L. R. Troxell had no trouble tracing the quartet. The floor of the box car was covered with white lime.

Mr. Troxell just followed the footprints to a nearby hobo jungle and arrested the four, all wearing their new straw hats.

OUTSPOKEN ROBBER

"What are you doing?" Policeman Ernest Schielke of Fargo, North Dakota asked Anthony Deklerow.

"I've robbed the joint," Deklerow said.

"And, by golly, he had," said the arresting officer.

Officer Schielke became suspicious when he saw Deklerow come out of a grocery store at 2:10 a.m. carrying a sack over his shoulder—eating strawberries.

The men were nice to Ugly. They gave him money—ten whole dollars—just to wait around and pull the two triggers.

execution on clover street

BY EDWARD D. HOCH

"A perfect crime? There's no such thing!"

"Just the same, we're going to kill Hammond in a way that's completely foolproof."

"Keep talking."

"Well, our big problem with Hammond is that we got to get him on the first try. He carries a small automatic with him at all times now, and if we ever botched a murder attempt, the union would give him a dozen bodyguards."

"In addition to which, we'd probably have the F.B.I. on our necks."

"Right! So the first attempt has to pay off. We have to hire somebody who won't fail—who *can't* fail—and who can't be traced back to us."

"What you want is a robot."

"We've got the next best thing—Ugly!"

"What? That idiot. He should've been locked up years ago."

"Take it easy, my friend. Ugly's big, with the strength of an ox. Even if Hammond gets off a shot with his little automatic, it won't stop Ugly. He'll keep coming, and with the double-barreled shotgun we'll give him, he can't miss. He'll blow Hammond in two."

"Then what? What if the cops catch him?"

"We're still in the clear. Ugly'll never remember who hired him. And what if he does remember? No jury'd convict us on the testimony of an insane man."

"It's sort of a rotten trick to play on Ugly."

"What the hell! So what if he's caught? The worse he'll get will be a life term in some nice quiet nut house."

"Sounds foolproof, all right."

"How can it miss? Ugly's certain to kill him, and the crime can't be traced to us."

Why did they always call him Ugly? He wondered why they did, as he stood beside the big shade tree on Clover Street where the men had put him.

The men had been nice to him. They'd given him all this money—ten whole dollars—just to kill Hammond. Who were they again? He couldn't even remember their faces now, but he'd seen them around before, and they were always nice to him. Ten whole dollars...

It was a good thing it was dark out, because the shotgun was too long to hide under his coat. He had the stock and most of the barrel under it, but the end of the barrel still stuck out, next to his face, pointing up at the sky like it was the gun of a soldier on guard duty.

Maybe he could even be a soldier some day! That would really be fun, shooting people all day long.

But first he must shoot Hammond. Hammond was with the union, and for some reason he had to die. Hammond lived in that big white house, right there across Clover Street. He was out now, but he would be back. The men told him not to move away from the house until he'd fired the gun.

A girl passed the tree where he stood. She was nice, but she walked extra-fast to get by him quickly. Why did they always do that? They couldn't see he was ugly in the dark. They couldn't see the barrels of the shotgun next to his face. So why did they run?

He wished he could get hold of one of them some day. But not tonight. Tonight he had to kill Hammond.

Above him a streak of lightning told him rain was coming. Why didn't Hammond come home? Now he'd get all wet just waiting here. He moved out from under the tree because once his mother had told him never to stand under trees when there was lightning. His mother— What had ever happened to his mother? He couldn't remember now. He couldn't even remember what she looked like.

Maybe the girl had run past

him to get out of the rain. Yes, that was it!

But it hadn't been raining then, had it?

It wasn't even raining now, not yet.

But then it started, with another roll of thunder. It rained in great huge drops that fell all around him, soaking his clothes.

A regular cloudburst...His suit was getting all wet. They told him not to move, so he'd be sure to shoot the right man. Maybe the nice men would give him an extra dollar to fix up his suit.

If he could only remember just who they were.

A car!

A car on Clover Street in the rain! This surely must be the man he was supposed to shoot.

The car was turning into the driveway. And there were his wife and kid getting out of the car and running into the house.

The wife was nice! Maybe after he killed Hammond...

But she would run away too, like they all did.

Hammond wouldn't run away, though. All he had to do, they told him, was pull the two triggers. Point it at the man and pull the two triggers.

Ugly crossed the street in the rain, liking the feel of it beating down on his head and seeing it splash in the growing puddles in the street.

More lightning! And he saw Hammond just closing the garage door.

What an easy way to make ten dollars!

Hammond turned and saw him there in the rain.

His hand went inside his coat, but by the time he had the automatic free of its holster, Ugly's fingers were already pulling back on the twin triggers of the shotgun...

"What happened? What in the hell went wrong?"

"Ugly's dead, that's what happened! Ugly's dead and Hammond's alive and all hell's broken loose!"

"But what went wrong with that perfect crime of yours?"

"That damned cloudburst."

"What about it? What d'yuh mean?"

"When you're dealing with an idiot like Ugly, you can't expect him to think for himself about anything. He must've been standing there in all that rain with the barrels of the gun pointed right at the sky. He must have collected an inch of rain water in those barrels before he tried to fire 'em."

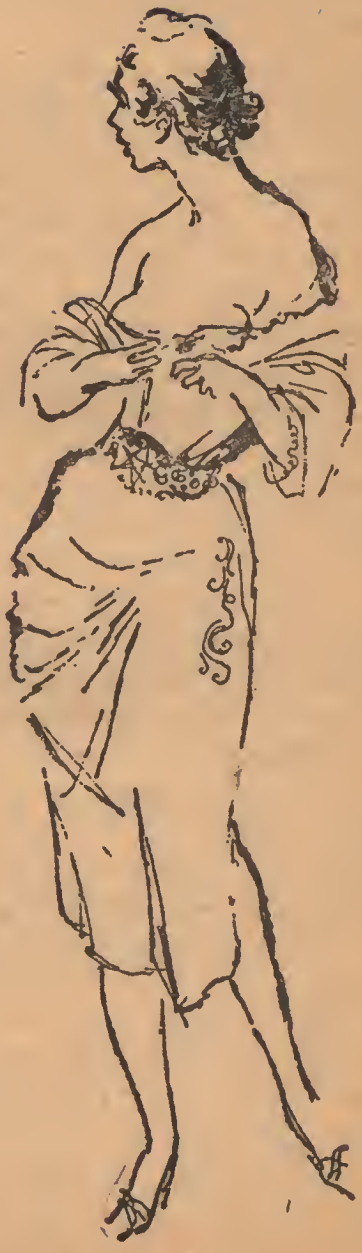
● ● ●

never trust a mistress

His job was to deliver her in Chicago. Much better for him if he'd stuck to business—and kept his hands where they belonged!

A Novelette

BY BUD BRANCH



I found a place to park the Buick on a side street. Then I walked up to Tijuana's main strip and turned right, shoving my way through the big Sunday tourist crowd, past all the souvenir sellers in their gaudy shops.

At each corner I had to shake off the cab drivers with their, "Taxi, senor?" Then the low-voiced follow-up, "Want to see the gorls now? Nice seventeen, eighteen year old..." I wasn't buying, but the hucksters were all in there pitching. Tijuana hadn't changed at all since Mr. Morales had last invited me across the border to do a job for him.

His office was still on the

second floor of the ancient building at the edge of the b-girl bar belt, and it was still the same dirt on the stairs with another layer on top.

I knocked at the door that stated LEGAL MATTERS—DIVORCES. A voice said, "Yes?", and I said, "It's Vic Boyd," and the voice said, "Come in, Vic," and I went in.

Mr. Morales' fat, like the dirt on the stairs, had accumulated another layer on top since I'd been there last. He was squeezed into a chair between his musty desk and the wall, and looked like he was going to spill out all over the room.

"Vic, I'm glad to see you again," he said, pushing out a huge hand to me without getting up. "How's things going?"

"About the same."

"I got something good for you, I think."

"Fine. I need the business. Where to and what's it worth?"

"Chicago for three hundred dollars."

"How many?"

"One from here to Chicago."

"Four hundred and you got a chauffeur."

He shrugged his massive shoulders. "Okay. Four hundred dollars. You always beat me in the bargaining, but all right, Vic. Four hundred it is."

It was too easy, and I silently swore at myself for being a fool. I should have known that when he'd offer three hundred right off for just two riders, that he'd expected to pay five. Somebody wanted to avoid the public transportation systems pretty bad, and I knew they weren't going to be wetbacks this time.

"Where do I make connections?"

"Where's your car parked?"

"Three cars down from the gas station this side of the Jai Alai court. It's one of those new Buick four-door hardtops."

"Good. Your passenger will be there at nine o'clock tonight. And Vic, the passenger is very valuable to certain people. Be careful. That's all I know." He awkwardly extracted a bulging wallet from his hip pocket and pawed through it, pulling out three centuries and five twenties and handing them to me. I stuck them in my pocket and started toward the door.

"Vic."

"What?"

"It bothers me to do business with these people."

"I don't want to hear your troubles. Just so the money's good."

He shook his head. "Damn. It's good money, Vic."

"And for such easy work." I patted my pocket where I had my share of the good money and left. Business is where you find it. It wasn't as easy as I made it sound, but what the hell, it wasn't bad now that I was getting known. Morales here along the border, Atlas in Chicago. Murphy Service on the west coast. Mostly Buicks. Because I liked Buicks.

I always felt depressed and probably a little scared when I had to cross the border into the States with something or somebody illegal. But, getting caught is one of the occupational hazards I occasionally have to watch for in my business.

Most of the time I'm pretty legal. My bread and butter is delivering cars and hauling people on a share-the-ride basis anywhere and e v e r y w h e r e around the country. You know, you've seen the ads, "Driving to East Coast Monday. Take four. Share expenses." That's me. Every Monday.

I get plenty of business because I can offer transportation quite a bit cheaper than the busses or trains. And, if it doesn't take too long to line up four or five riders who want to travel in the same general direction where I'm to deliver the car, I make pretty good money. Five, six hundred dollars a month after expenses, and, of course, I always have a new car.

It's bad though when I hit a dry spell a long way from my home base in Los Angeles and can't get any passengers. Then I have to get in the empty car and pile up mileage and time until I find a town where I can fill the car with riders through my newspaper ads or other contacts. This deadhead traveling cuts into the profit fast.

But, there are other angles to balance against these dry spells. I've been in the business going on ten years now and met enough of the right people so that ever so often I catch a bigger job, like this one for Morales. This makes the difference between living and living good for awhile. The fattest one was hauling a quarter of a million dollars in cash from the east to a ship in San Diego. Naturally the guys I was hauling for sent a guard on that one. I think it was from one of those big armored car robberies back there where the bank had the serial numbers tabbed and the outfit doing the

job had to get the money out of the country. I picked up three grand for that trip.

I wasn't going to make that kind of money on this one, but four hundred bucks wasn't bad for a three-day ride. This was my own car and with luck I'd fill it with the legal trade I could pick up in Vegas going onto San Francisco. I told myself to quit worrying and turned into a bar for a bottle of beer.

I hadn't had my first swallow when one of the house girls drifted silently onto the next stool. Her voice was as soft and pleading as her fingers running up and down my arm.

"Buy me a drink please?"

"Not now."

"Please?"

"No."

I didn't pay any more attention to her, but she didn't go away. I guess she figured if she waited long enough, I'd break down and start buying just to have someone to talk to. And there was nothing wrong with her reasoning, because when you're always moving around like I am, the only kind of women you get are either working for the house or working for themselves. And anybody who is working expects to get paid.

But right then I didn't want any commercial relationship. I felt more like remembering the other kind, like when I had a wife for two whole years before I got drafted back in '42. It's all pretty dim and distant now —the small apartment we had, with me bringing home a weekly pay check and my pretty, young bride figuring out how to stretch the most out of it, so we could put a little more in the savings account for a house and other things people usually want. But, it was a long time ago, and the things that happened afterwards to ruin it have blotted it pretty well out of my mind.

I ordered another beer and wished I could remember more of those days and less of the two years in the federal prison with the dishonorable discharge from the army on a rape charge that followed a guy's death which I inadvertently had a hand in.

Harry Spencer had been a school teacher in civilian life, and he had the kind of a mind that goes with that occupation. When the army shipped me out to join the outfit he was in, he'd already spent over two years sitting around that anti-aircraft gun on the ten square miles of island in the middle

of the Pacific. I replaced the radioman who'd been sent home sick with something tropical. There wasn't room in the radio tent with all that equipment for more than two guys to live, and Harry was the other tenant.

The first months I was there he was all right, but then he started using that intellectual mind too much. It began with just a sentence or so now and then about how we weren't ever going to get to go home and things like you'd hear from everybody when they were feeling bad. Then, he started wondering about his wife and what she was doing with her time when he'd been away so long. Finally, it got so it was about all he could think or talk about.

I wasn't much help to him. In fact, I was young enough and stupid enough to get a kick out of it. Then, I noticed that he'd really get stirred up when I'd play the broadcast band on the radio and pick up a program full of sentimental songs and music. He'd start raving about how his wife was probably out dancing with some guy on the homefront, and he'd really build up some nice pictures for himself.

It was a pretty good show, so every evening I'd switch on the set and lie back on my cot to watch. He'd sit listening in front of the radio, nodding and thinking and working himself up. That is, he did that until the night he stood up, snapped off the set and walked out of the tent into several million miles of ocean. Another kind of war casualty. One whose heart had been eaten out instead of shot out. And I'd been a big help in setting the table.

It knocked me off the deep end and I started drinking steadily because it was the only way I could stop thinking about it. A few nights later I was all hopped up on native whiskey and had managed to get my mind off Harry and what I had helped him do to himself when I wandered onto the off-limits section by the small island hospital. I guess I thought I was Casanova himself when I ran into that nurse. It seems to me she had a drink with me, but when I tried to put my arm around her she went screaming for the M.P.'s.

The army called it attempted rape and nailed me to the cross with a long prison sentence. After the war ended, they reviewed some cases, including mine, and I got out. I was still lugging Harry's death around

in my conscience. But that hadn't been enough, so I'd gotten another belt. Somewhere along the line during those two years I received a letter from my wife's lawyer telling me she was getting a divorce. I don't think it was really her idea. Her family and friends must have talked her into it, because she was always kind of weak and easily led. But, she had been my wife, and I had loved her very much.

I felt those fingers sliding up and down my arm again.

"Buy me a drink please?"

I looked at the house girl still sitting next to me. Then I noticed that I'd finished my second bottle of beer.

"Sure." I signalled to the bartender and pulled out one of the twenties I'd gotten earlier. It lasted until eight-thirty that night when I had to leave to meet my passenger.

I was there on time and sitting behind the steering wheel smoking when I heard a set of high heels come clicking up the sidewalk, and a tall, strawberry blonde in a low-slung blouse and swirling skirt opened the door, swinging into the front seat and dropping a small leather traveling case in the back. Then she looked at me.

"Hello, Vic. My name's Elsa."

"Hello, Elsa. I wasn't expecting a woman."

"Mr. Morales thought it would be a pleasant surprise for you."

I looked her over and didn't feel nearly so bad about not trying to squeeze that extra hundred transportation fee out of the fat go-between. She was probably pushing thirty and plenty attractive. An unknown sun had burned her skin dark and the contrast it made with that pale hair was eye-catching. She smiled, one eyebrow rising crookedly, and I felt she was laughing at me for looking so satisfied. That irritated me a little, and I said,

"Well, if we're going to Chicago, we'd better get started. We've hit it right because Sunday night is the best time to cross the border. There's too big a crowd going back for the guards to check anyone very carefully."

I reached into the back seat and got the two silly looking straw hats with visors I'd brought along, figuring they'd guarantee to give us that Joe Tourist and the Mrs. look.

"Here put this on your head. Don't talk unless the guy at the

gate asks you a direct question. You're Mrs. Boyd and we live in Los Angeles. You were born there. Okay?"

She nodded and I edged the car out in the street and fell into the long line of traffic inching its way across the border into the States. I was worried as usual. Finally, the car directly ahead of us got to the check point, and for some reason the guard really gave it a going over. The driver had to get out and open the trunk. Then he had to show some of the things in his wallet. Finally, he got the go ahead and the guard signalled us to pull up. I felt like I had a stomach full of lead instead of beer. Elsa sat staring straight ahead, without moving.

The uniformed figure flashed a light on my registration on the steering wheel column and asked, "Did you buy anything in Mexico?"

I shook my head. "No, just over for the races at Caliente this afternoon."

"What city and state were you born in?"

"Minneapolis, Minnesota."

"You?" He flashed the light on Elsa.

"Los Angeles." Her voice was tight.

"Where?"

"Los Angeles, California."

He flashed his light in the back seat, paused, then motioned us to pass on. I didn't breathe until we got safely on the freeway for San Diego.

Elsa broke the silence. "Do you have a cigarette, Vic?"

I pulled a pack out of my sport coat pocket. Her hand was trembling as she took them. "Here. Use the dashboard lighter." She lit two and handed me one. I took a deep drag, easing the smoke out through my nostrils. It really tasted good. "That scared you?"

She nodded, drew deep on the cigarette. "Where you from?" she asked. "Where'd Mr. Morales get you?"

"We're old friends." Friends wasn't the word, but it covered everything. "Why?"

"I thought you'd be—different."

"Better or worse?"

"Worse, much worse."

"I'm agreeably surprised too." Then I told her, briefly, how I made a living.

"That's legitimate. I'm not," she said when we finished.

I glanced at her for an instant, then turned back to the road. "When I'm in something illegitimate, I don't want to know about it. Saves wear and tear on the conscience. I get

paid for driving, period."

I felt her looking at me, and I got that feeling that she was laughing at me, as if she had a private joke and I was the butt of it. I kicked the accelerator down and picked up speed, and after a moment she moved over and looked at the speedometer, saying,

"I don't like to drive fast, Vic. Please slow down."

I eased up on the gas. She stayed over close to me in the middle of the seat and said,

"I didn't mean to be mysterious, Vic. It just seemed in keeping with everything else. Shall we try it again?"

"Sure. Where you from?"

"I got caught living in China when the Reds took over. Living conditions weren't the best, so I had a proposition to come to America and I accepted."

"What were you doing living there?"

"I'd been there since the war. You see I was born in Japan where my father was a consultant in the ship building industry. He was an American, but my mother was German. Naturally during the war we were watched very closely, but near the end when everything was collapsing, I managed to get across to China."

"You talk better English than I do. Ever been in the States before?"

She nodded. "I went to school at the University of Chicago, my father's alma mater. I graduated and went back to the Orient."

"So now you're coming back as a post graduate?"

"Not quite. But not too far off either." She smiled again and turned her eyes toward the windshield. I wanted her to keep on talking. The smile didn't irritate me anymore, and there was something about her voice, soft and husky and familiar, that was soothing like somebody stroking your hair.

She didn't say anymore, and pretty soon we started inland toward Las Vegas. We ran into a little fog and I put the windshield wipers on. I like driving at night and was feeling good for the first time in several hours. Elsa had fallen asleep, but it was nice just having her there beside me.

Quite a while later I stopped for gas and she woke up, stretching lazily.

"Hello, Vic."

"Hello, Elsa."

"I'm hungry."

I got squared away with the filling station attendant and pulled the car across the street

to an all-night restaurant and motel and parked in front. She didn't move to get out, just lay back against the seat smiling at me. It was still the same smile and the eyebrow still raised, but I couldn't figure out why I hadn't liked it at first because it sure looked warm and inviting then. I put my arms around her and drew her close. She raised her face to meet mine, searching for my mouth with her half open lips. They were even warmer and more inviting than the smile.

"Vic," she whispered.

"What?"

"I'm hungry."

I began to take her in my arms again.

She pushed me away. "For food."

We went in the restaurant and ate ham and eggs and had refills on the coffee. I went to the rest room. When I came back Elsa was standing beside the juke box, singing softly. When she saw me she smiled sadly, and the low-voiced melody sent a shiver through me and drew me across the room toward her. I took her in my arms and we seemed to float around the small, deserted dance floor, her lips breathing the words of the song into my ear. She was selling me the moon and the stars. My sales resistance was low, so I bought the whole package because they were both top products that I hadn't sampled for a long time.

After a while the record ended and the haunting voice stopped singing. I kissed her again standing there in the middle of the floor. When I stopped, she kept her arms around my neck, arching her back so she could look up at me.

"You know what, Vic?"

"What?"

"Now I'm sleepy."

"We'll have to do something about that."

I checked us in, then went back to the car for our bags. We had a nice room with a big double bed and a shower. There was a kitchen too, with an ice box and a stove. Even coffee in a little jar and a pot to make it in. Elsa said wouldn't that be good in the morning, and I said, yeah, but let's not rush things, morning's still a long ways off.

She reached up and wrapped her arms around my neck again, and said softly, "It is, isn't it?"

I've been around plenty but I had never met anything like this. And I was getting paid

for it! How lucky can a guy get, I wondered.

In the morning we drank coffee at a little table by the edge of the pool with the sun shining warmly overhead. She'd put on a form-fitting white one-piece bathing suit, and I couldn't keep my eyes off of her while we sat there. Like on her face, she was burned to a golden brown all over, and I decided strawberry blondes always looked their best when they'd stayed out in the sun too long.

When we finished the second cup, I remembered we probably had a schedule to keep. I didn't want to, but I said,

"We ought to be getting started pretty soon."

"All right, Vic. As soon as I have a swim."

She shook her head. "It's been a lot of fun, Vic. It will be until we get to Chicago. Then—" She shrugged her bare shoulders and looked over toward the pool— "you'll never see me again. At least, you better not see me again."

I frowned. "What do you mean by a crack like that? Who you trying to scare—?"

She plunged into the pool.

I finished my coffee and sat there for a while. I began to break my own Rule No. 1. I began to wonder what I was in... What she was in... Who she really was... I went inside to our room. When I got there, I looked into the little leather suitcase which was open. There was a .38 on top of some lace panties. I didn't touch it. Plenty of people carried guns. I did touch the fat roll of bills, though. It came out just a little over forty-five hundred dollars.

I put the money back in the case next to the gun and went out to our table by the pool. Elsa was sitting there drying off in the warm morning sun.

"How was the water?"

"Fine. You should have come in."

"Not today."

The eyebrow went up and she smiled. "Why didn't you take off?"

"Take off?"

"Yes. With the money." She was smiling at me again in that way that was almost laughing at me.

I shrugged. "Maybe because it'll be another night before we reach Chi."

She laughed. "I'll give you a testimonial to show to any of your future female clients, telling how much I've enjoyed your service. And trustworthy too."

"It's nice that you're happy." I lit a cigarette and looked

down at her long legs stretched out in front of me. There was a little patch of white skin just where her bathing suit ended that had somehow been missed by those other suns. I wanted to touch it. Instead I said, "I didn't take the gun, either."

She took a cigarette from the pack and lit it, dragging the smoke way down into her lungs with each puff. "Didn't even touch it, I bet."

"No."

"It might have bullets in it, Vic."

"It's a lousy gun if it hasn't." I didn't like the way she had said that, though, about the .38. Her eyes had narrowed slightly, and there was something deep behind them...

"Come on, Vic," she said. She rose and put out her hand to me. "I'll go dress now."

She drew the blinds to get out of the wet suit, so we hit the highway nearly an hour later than planned. But it was still early and I could tell we were in for a hot day's drive.

I switched the radio on. It picked up some static and some news and a soap opera, and finally settled down to an hour's music for morning pleasure-listening. She said, after awhile, lighting a cigarette, "I wish they hadn't picked you, Vic."

I threw her a glance. "What happened about that testimonial?"

"I don't mean that."

"Go on."

"You shouldn't get into deals you know nothing about, Vic."

"Like I told you. I get paid to deliver passengers from one spot to another, cars too. If the passenger happens to be alone and beautiful, and lonely, well then—"

"I'm not beautiful, Vic. Don't give me that."

"You are, to me."

She turned. "You really mean that, don't you?" Her voice was a little surprised.

"I mean it."

"Damn. Goddamn."

She meant Goddam that it had to be me.

"We can see each other again," I said. "There's no law against it."

"You're a fool, Vic." She seemed sore now.

"A four-hundred dollar fool." I grinned at her. But I was trying to think it out.

"Damn," she muttered again.

"Is the money hot?" I asked her.

"No. It's mine. Five thousand for the whole deal, see? You get five hundred, Vic. Mine is the toughest part of the

job, so I get the big share."

"I don't see it."

"You will."

I was too close to whatever it was not to follow it through all the way. "All right, you better tell me all of it," I said wearily.

"I'd be killed if I told you, Vic. You'll have to find out for yourself. You'll have to do the right thing all the way, right up to the time we reach Max's."

"He's the one in Chicago?"

"Yes."

"Go on."

"That's all."

"Go on, Elsa!"

She didn't answer.

"I could threaten to kill you."

She shrugged. "That wouldn't do any good, Vic. Believe me, it wouldn't. I'm just a deadhead in this. But, a girl doesn't make forty-five hundred dollars *this* easily for a few day's work. You're on your own, Vic. Same as me. But I'll tell you this: either one of us can wind up dead unless we're very, very lucky. And I just don't think we're both going to be lucky."

I slowed the car, drove it off the road, braked it. "Get out," I told her.

"They'll kill you, Vic, if you do it this way. Believe me, they will." She was looking at me straight. She wasn't lying. "You can't get out except by going all the way through with it."

"All the way through to Max. Handing you over to him."

"That's right."

"And there's a chance, when I do this, that I stay healthy."

"That's right. It all depends whether a certain thing happens or does not happen. And whether Max believes me."

"Believes what?"

"That though we were roommates, our relationship remained platonic."

"But naturally."

"Vic—"

I started the motor again. "If I'm taking the same risk as you," I said, "we split the money."

"All right," she said softly. "I didn't think it was going to be like this. I didn't know the driver would be—well, you. I wish it had been some goon. The money—take your half when we reach wherever we'll reach tonight."

Now I liked it even less. It was all too pat, too easy. Except that if I did "a certain thing" I was going to die. And she couldn't tell me what that certain thing was or she would

die! Fine! Just Fine!

This night couldn't be like last night. We wanted it to be, but it couldn't.

We packed the next A. M. and as she was brushing her hair before the bureau mirror I counted it out, taking two thousand dollars. I saw how closely she watched me in the mirror.

I picked up the gun. Having it in my hand, cold and weighty, was when I thought of the other twenty-five hundred dollars right there for the taking. But there was something to this deal. How easy she had been, eager even; the forty-five hundred casually carried in the suitcase, this Max—

"Okay," she said, "let's go."

She was standing at my elbow.

"Put it away, Vic, and let's go."

"Sure." I smelled the barrel. I don't know much about such things, but it didn't smell as if it had been fired recently. I broke it. Two bullets had been fired.

"You didn't have this in the suitcase when we came over the border?"

"No; on me."

I put it back. She kissed me full on the mouth. "Vic..." she said in that way of hers.

We went out to the car.

As I drove I tried to figure it. The twenty-four hundred dollars plus wasn't bad pay. But I wanted to be sure I was going to be able to spend it.

"What am I in, Elsa?"

"It's like I told you, Vic."

"Come off it. There's something cooking and I have a feeling I'm the thing in the pot, slowly reaching the well-done stage."

"Max will tell you. Like you, I'm just out for the ride. Let's move it up, Vic, we don't want to be late."

"Max doesn't like to wait?"

"That's right."

"He might never see you, or me—"

"It wouldn't do any good, Vic. I've told you that."

"I might get us both out, if you'd tell me."

"Might get us both killed, too."

I swore. She patted my thigh. Then she sighed and lay back, her head against the upholstery. "It's a lousy life, eh Vic?"

I could have left her there, on the road. Dead or alive. Sure. But I remembered what Morales had said and I believed her—it would be dangerous not to deliver her to Max. Max...

"Who is he, Elsa? Max. His last name and so on."

She paused. Then said, "Henkel. Max Henkel. Ever hear of him?"

I frowned. "I think so."

"The philanthropist. Good to the orphanages and old ladies homes. A big man in Chicago. Politics, behind the scenes. Everything. The cops love him almost as much as the ward heelers. A member of the national crime syndicate, and one of the most dangerous men in the States."

"A Jeykll-Hyde."

"Let's say a Robin Hood. He likes that much better."

"And you—you're one of his girls, Elsa."

"I am his girl."

I whistled.

"His one and only. I can have anything I want in the world, Vic. Yachts. Mink coats. Name it. But no cash, very little cash."

"Five grand is not a very little. Not in my league, anyway."

"That's not mine, Vic. That's for traveling expenses. What I don't spend has to be returned."

"Let's keep on going, and spend it."

"I told you. How far do you think we'd get as long as he feels as he does about me."

"As if he owns you."

"He does own me. I owe Max plenty, Vic. He took me out of the Chicago gutter. We might even say—the streets. He gave me a chance. All right, he owns me. And I don't mind being owned. He's very good to me."

"And he would kill anyone who touches you."

"Yes. But you...Vic... you... I don't know what got into me. Maybe it was the surprise."

"Sure," I said.

We pulled into Chicago around six that evening, tired and silent and grimy. I told myself I was ready for Max.

I wasn't ready, though, for the cops. They were there waiting with him.

"This the girl detective, Mr. Henkel?" the tall plain-clothes' man asked.

Max was a squat guy, about five five, swarthy, with long powerful arms and a barrel chest. He said,

"Yes. The reward belongs to her. You men get the credit. That right?"

They nodded. They looked at her. The other cop, the shorter one, said, "The kid has nerve.

Two days with a killer."

"A *what?*"

"Killer," he answered me levelly. "The guard who got it when you and your pal knocked over the Iroquois Savings nine days ago. Remember?"

Elsa said, "My skin crawled every inch of the way." She looked at me and shuddered, as if I were a snake.

"I'm no killer, and she's no detective. She's—"

"Show the man your license," Max said.

She showed it—more for them, I knew, then for me. How difficult would it be for this Henkel to get her fixed up with a license?

"What the hell gives here..." I wasn't scared, yet. I was sore. She placed her suitcase on the desk, opened it.

Then I was scared.

The .38 was there, innocent enough looking. I remembered picking it up, hefting it, smelling...

I made a move for it that I thought was fast and found myself sitting on the floor. One of them had moved faster and hit me with a safe or something on the side of the head. The tall cop was rubbing his knuckles.

I got up, still a little dazed, telling myself it was impossible for such a skinny guy to be able to hit so hard.

I had to start somewhere. A lot of noisy protests wouldn't do me a damn bit of good. I could see that. My prints were on that .38—mine and no one else's.

"The law must be upheld at all costs," I heard Max saying through my thoughts. "We can't have men like this—"

"Shut up!" I shot at him. I was getting the picture. A beautiful frame. Whoever killed the bank guard had killed him with this gun. The prints had been wiped clean. Mine would make a nice clear impression. Killer Boyd dies, Mr. Henkel wins a medal and public praise. Robin Hood. And ten grand to the doll baby who never had any cash of her own.

"Where were you at noon, September tenth?" Reedy asked. He was the tall one.

Where the hell *was* I at noon, September tenth?...

Ah! on my way into Chicago. On my way in but about fifty miles out, driving a new black Buick. No passengers. The passengers—Mr. & Mrs. Thomas Bixby, Jr.—had been dropped at Pine Forest. So go ahead, Vic old boy...*prove* you were fifty miles out about noon on the tenth. Prove you

couldn't have been at the Iroquois Bank since you delivered the car to the Atlas Agency at around 1:30. Fat chance!

Morales—was he in this too? Maybe... This had been deliberately, carefully, set up. It had to be saving the skin of someone big; someone real big didn't want any heat whatever turned in his direction.

"We have witnesses waiting to identify you..."

"Naturally," I said. Witnesses would have seen a man about my size leaning out of a car window, shooting, making his getaway. Not necessary to buy or rig witnesses. The average joe, wanting to see justice done, was conditioned to say as soon as I was fed to him, "Yes, that's him!"

I turned to the girl. "Why?" I asked her. "You know I didn't do it. You know me well enough to know I couldn't have done it."

Something stirred deep in her eyes, but her expression did not change. I went out with the cops. Rather, they pushed me out.

On the street, I asked them: "Are you guys in on this? I didn't kill that guard. Is it worth it, what you're doing?"

"Move!"

"You'll need a lot more than just my fingerprints on that gun to get a conviction. Even with witnesses. For instance, why a three-day ride up here from Texas with Goldilocks before making the pinch? If I hadn't touched that gun..."

They weren't listening.

A surge of panic told me to run. But they'd have me in a minute, or shoot me down before I'd get fifteen yards. Besides, making a bolt would stamp me as guilty, if they really were cops.

They were real enough. So was the police station. And the fingerprint apparatus.

When they finished taking my prints, I was taken into a room.

"Sit here," Reedy, the tall cop told me. There were four chairs set around a round table. I took one of them. Chason put a handcuff around my wrist and snapped the other to the arm of the chair. Reedy tapped his jacket pocket with the .38 in it. He had my prints in his hand. "Ballistics should have the answer in fifteen minutes."

Chason nodded, took out a pack of cigarettes.

"Reedy—"

He turned and looked at me from the door. "You don't think I did it." I said.

"That's for the jury to decide. We just catch them."

"You didn't catch me. I was delivered. Can't you see—?"

He went out, closing the door.

"This can really happen then," I said to Chason. "When a case is tough to break and the D.A. or the public is howling for an arrest, you'll catch at any kind of straw."

"Do you have any idea how often I've heard that same tune? And every one of them was guilty. Every damn one. Want a smoke?"

I nodded. He held a match for me. I said, "I'm in a bad spot. I can see that. Those witnesses, and they're probably legit, will *want* to identify me as the guy who fired from that car. That's human nature. If they're at all unsure, they'll say yes."

"Like Reedy said, we're cops, not the court. Now let me have this smoke in peace. It's been a hard day."

"Yeah, sitting there on your butt in Max's living room, waiting. What I can't figure, Chason, is that long, long ride all the way from Texas just to get my fingerprints on that .38. A girl like Elsa could manage it in a couple of hours, right here on the home lot. Or they could knock off a bum, put the .38 in his hand and you could mark your case 'closed'. I don't get it."

"Please!" Chason said. "I'm tired." And blew smoke out of his nostrils.

"No. They wanted a patsy. Someone who looked like the murderer. Sure as hell, Max wasn't the murderer, huh Chason? I mean he wasn't sitting in that car, he didn't actually pull the trigger."

The detective didn't bother to answer.

"Someone knew I'd rolled into Chi that day. Mr. & Mrs. Jenkins. No... Let's see, I didn't play around at any bar that night. *Wait a minute!*" I was digging, trying to find it. "Maybe the *gun* was in Texas. How'd it get there? Whose gun? Morales?"

"Who's Morales?"

"The guy who set me up with this job." I told him what my business was, how this job had come about. "He's always out for a fast buck, same as me. Same as all of us. But this kind of deal... Sure as hell, Morales didn't tip over the Iroquois. And of course Henkel didn't. At least not so's you'd ever be able to notice it. Not now that they've got me and the gun tied together. I'll find

out, though, soon as I'm out."

"When you're out," Chason echoed laconically.

Reedy came back in. "Take the cuffs off," he said to Chason.

The cuffs were off. I rubbed my right wrist.

"Okay, you can go, Boyd."

I stared at him.

"We haven't got enough to hold you. The gun was clean."

"Clean—"

"Not a thing on it. It's the gun that killed the guard all right. Ballistics checked that out. But there's not a print on it. Wiped clean."

I stood there.

"Well, get the hell out."

She'd wiped my prints off. It had to be that way. Somewhere toward the end of the trip, when I was in one of those roadside johns, she'd changed her mind. I said,

"Max is going to be real upset about this."

Chason looked at me, then to his partner. "I hate to say it because it means a hell of a lot more work for us, but I think this guy's clean."

"It means work no matter how we figure it. Okay, beat it, Boyd. You're free."

She's not, I thought. When Max hears this, she's in deep water.

I took a taxi to within a block of where Max lived. I went to a phone booth, got information and asked for the number of the Southmoore Hotel. I dialed the number, asked for Mr. Henkel. I got the break I was hoping for. No answer. That had to mean he and Elsa were out, to dinner most likely. To make sure, though, I tried the house phone in the lobby before I went up. No answer.

I took the elevator to the seventh floor. It wasn't absolutely necessary to get in, but that would be better. I got in, easy. Sometimes you *get* the breaks. The maid was turning down the beds in the big suite. I slipped in the door and rolled under the twin bed nearest the door. I felt like a damn fool lying there—something out of the Sunday comics, only it wasn't funny. I tried to decide what to do without the .38. He was a powerful little monkey all right, but I'd be too much for him. Easily too much, with football and army judo both on my side.

There could be a gun in the apartment of course, but I didn't think he'd be carrying one. Men like Max Henkel had others carry the guns for them. And shoot them, too.

Elsa was taking a big chance

—a chance with her life maybe —to take me off the hook. Or was she counting on Max being so nuts about her he would let it ride? After the maid left, I waited a couple of minutes, then rolled out from under the bed. Maybe I could find that gun. Or a knife. Something. It was not an apartment where you cooked, so there was no knife and in the short time I had to search, I found no gun. There was a letter-opener on a desk, though, about six inches long. The point was almost needle sharp. The door opened so suddenly I had no chance to duck behind a chair, much less get back under the bed. I slipped the letter-opener up my right sleeve.

As I turned to face them, I cursed the plush hall carpeting and the good lock on the door which had let the key turn so silently.

She looked beautiful in a pale blue gown and the cornflower in her hair. The three guys with her looked very unbeautiful. Max said, "What the hell!—" then to one of the two big men: "Al, make sure that door's double-locked. Joe, the bedroom door." Joe stayed in the room blocking any possible escape.

Elsa's eyes were signaling me wildly: *You shouldn't have come here, you should have left town.*

I agreed with her now. Max plus two I had not expected.

"Who let you in, Mr. Boyd?" Max asked, his voice level, almost friendly. He sat down, told everyone to make themselves comfortable. Al made himself comfortable in a chair which he pulled over in front of the door. The other big guy stood at an angle to me, his hands hanging loose, ready, his eyes on my hands.

Elsa sat with Max on the couch. I remained standing.

"Well?" Max asked me again. "Who let you in here?"

"The door was ajar. I just—walked in."

"T h e r e are two doors. Which?"

"The other. The one that leads into the bedroom." That was true. My mind was working, searching for a way out. I saw none. I was reasonably safe as long as that phone didn't ring and Chason or Reedy reported what they'd discovered.

"They released you very fast, Mr. Boyd." There was an ominous undertone to his voice. He turned and looked at Elsa. "I trust all went—well?"

"Very well," I lied. "There's such a thing as bail."

"And then you came right

here. Immediately. Why?"

"To see you. Find out what the kicker is."

"The kicker?" The man in the chair at the door was listening keenly, very keenly indeed. He's my size, I thought; same coloring. I looked at the other one, off to my right. He was too. Either of them could have been in that car, shot the guard.

"That's right," I answered. "The kicker. The frame. Why me? How-come me? Why bring a guy all the way from Texas, let him sleep with your lady detective—"

Elsa's intake of breath broke the silence. Her eyes were screaming at me, appealing, unbelieving.

I saw color rise in Max's face. I'd never seen quite so much rage inflame any man's face so quickly. It was choking out of him. "Miss Vickers was on a job. Business. She wouldn't let anyone put a hand on her. Especially a—"

"Killer?" I finished for him. I shrugged, putting as much into the shrug as I could. It was a way, the only possible way of getting out of here. Maybe. With luck. If I could get him sore enough. "I'm not *that* revolting, am I? We were lonely. You know how it is. The stars in the desert and all."

"You lie!" he was spitting it at me. He'd risen and taken a step toward me.

"What's the difference? It isn't," I said, trying to watch him and the other two, "as if she were your wife or any—"

He lunged at me. "Shut up! *Shut up!* You bastard. You bastard liar." He whirled around to her to question or to curse her. That was his mistake. He was close, close enough. Whatever he was going to tell her or ask her, he never got to.

I grabbed him with my left arm, fast, around the throat, and struck the letter-opener through his clothing to his skin. I had him in front of me, good, a shield. I'd turned as I took him so that neither the big one on the right or the one in the chair could shoot without hitting him.

"I have a knife. I'll put it through you, Goddam you, Henkel, if you make a move I don't tell you to make." I was speaking for the others as well as for him. The point was prodding him. I had the wall at my back now and I walked him sidewise with me, in front of me, toward the door.

"Get out of that chair," I told the guy. "Open that door.

And if your hands go out of sight for a second, you got a dead boss. What the hell you bums trying to pull!"

He got out of the chair, did as I said. Max must have been real valuable to them, a good provider. "Elsa—"

She looked at me.

"You want to go, or stay?"

She walked across the room to the door.

"Get the elevator," I told her. "Make sure there are people in it. Step in first. I'll follow."

She nodded, went.

She pushed the button. The elevator came. It was only a few yards from the doorway. I stood just outside the door, Max just inside, still held in front of me.

I let him go and hurried to the waiting cage—the longest yards I ever walked in my life. They didn't shoot. They didn't want that. They had other jobs to do, other banks to hold up, other frames to maneuver.

As the cage went down I heard him calling "Elsa!" as if he couldn't believe it. The lousy little monkey. No wonder he called so loud for her to come back. He'd never find anything again like her, never.

We went through that lobby fast, and into a cab.

I wanted to go back to police headquarters, but she said, "No, Vic, no. Please..."

I owed her something. We took a cab, caught a bus marked New York. We got off the bus, though, on its second stop, and went south on another toward Louisville. We rode all night.

She fell asleep on my shoulder, and I let her sleep. When we reached Lou, we found a good second-rate hotel and then she told me.

I had driven the new black buick into Chicago directly after the bank job, in which a black Buick had been used. The manager of the Atlas Distributing Company, which Max owned, undercover, told him about me when he learned Max was in a jam—or could be in a jam if the cops looked real hard and latched onto Max' men who had done the bank job.

"The two in that room?"

"I don't know for sure, but I think so."

"Go on."

"But when they went to plant the gun on you in your hotel room, you'd gone. Taken off for Texas. This time, Max learned, driving another Atlas car on a private deal. So he knew where to find you. He felt that was better. After you

were brought back here, it would look like flight on your part. He sent me to bring you back."

"His own girl?"

"He didn't feel he could trust anyone else."

I grinned.

"And Morales?"

"Morales had nothing to do with the .38, Vic. It was my job to locate you, make the arrangements for the trip. That wasn't difficult, since we knew your business. I expected a goon. Instead, I got tied onto a man I fell for, hard. I fell in love with you, Vic. Can a girl help that?"

"So hard you decided at the last not to feed me to the electric chair."

"I couldn't, Vic. I couldn't!"

"And what were you going to tell Max when he learned the prints you'd said were on there, weren't? That I must have wiped them off without your knowledge just before hitting Chicago?"

"What else, Vic?"

"And he'd have swallowed it?"

"I don't know. But—"

"You're not exactly a sterling character, Elsa—" My eyes found hers, talked to her.

"I'll try to change that as we go along."

"And Max?"

"I don't believe he'll try to find us. He'll be glad to let this rest."

"You'd have saved us a lot of trouble if you'd confided in me the second night of our honeymoon."

"That's nice, Vic..." her voice was soft, "the way you said that. Honeymoon. You're really very nice. And you love me too, don't you?"

"Like hell I do."

She smiled up into my face. "You wouldn't have come back to get me otherwise. Would you have killed Max?"

"Would I have had a choice?"

"I guess not. Vic, let's not get into any more trouble. Let's go far away."

"Okay. Now how about some sleep."

"Yes," she said, softly in my ear. "Hold me."

I held her.

● ● ●

Pop's gang was sure having a good time.

All day long Pop sucked at a bottle of bourbon, watching baseball and soap operas on TV, letting his long cigars burn scars into the big red leather chairs.

Trigger prowled around the ballroom, nursing his short beers, listening to the hi-fi system that had outlets in all thirty-seven rooms of the mansion. Trigger liked to play tunes like *Stardust*. Sometimes he'd pick up a pillow and dance around the floor with it, eyes half-closed. When he got tired of that, he'd pull out his automatic and shoot a vase off the mantel.

Benson worked out in the gym every morning, then did thirty laps in the swimming pool. He was proud of his muscles. They stuck out all over him like lumps in a sack of potatoes.

But after the workout, and a sunbath in the big gardens that the weeds were beginning to take over now, he liked to play games. He'd get a case of champagne from the cellar. The champagne was warm, and he'd shake the bottles to get lots of fizz. Then he'd aim the bottle like a gun, and the corks would shoot out like little cannonballs. I was his favorite target. He'd sneak up on me and I'd get socked in the neck or the ear or the eye. Unless he was laughing too hard, Benson would tip the foaming bottle to

BY ROBERT PLATE

a guy named mabel

The gang had everything money can buy, women included. But purchasing the brunette proved a mistake.

his mouth and guzzle. The lamebrain thought it was very funny.

Of us all, though, I guess Mabel had the most fun. Harry Maple is his real name, but we all called him Mabel. Not that he was a queer. Call him that and you'd get a quick knife in the ribs. But Mabel did have clean rosy cheeks like a girl, and he moved kind of delicate, and he had soft white hands and a narrow waist, so Mabel fit him as a tag. He never seemed to mind the name.

Anyway, Mabel worked up a good game of darts. The walls of one big room were covered with oil paintings, portraits of lots of old geezers, relatives of the owner. Mabel would take a handful of darts and start chucking. He worked out his own scoring system. One point for the body, two points for the head, five points for the eyes, ten points for the breasts of a woman or the fly of a man. He got pretty good at it. Most of the time he'd go for the ten-pointers, of course, and he'd beat us every time.

Yeah, Mabel was good at darts. But we'd been in the mansion almost a month now, and the big portraits were so full of holes you could hardly make out what they were.

New ideas for fun came easy to Mabel, though, and one day he spoke to me with a pleased look in his pretty blue eyes. "I'm going to make a bomb," he said, like he'd just invented the airplane.

"A bomb? What for?"

"What the hell do you think what for? To blow something up, stupid."

For the next few hours Mabel hummed happily, working out his gadget with an alarm clock and some sticks of dynamite left over from the job. Just before lunch he joined us in the dining room, where we all ate at a mahogany table twenty feet long. We used to play good games of tic-tac-toe on that table, carving out the game with our knives.

"Listen everybody," Mabel said. "At twelve o'clock she goes."

It was one minute to twelve. Pop took a swig of wine, and said, "Listen to what?"

"My bomb!"

We all sat still. Was Mabel going to blow up the whole mansion, just for kicks, for laughs?

BOOM!

The mahogany table jumped in the air. A plate of beans

spilled into my lap. Pop grabbed to keep the wine bottle from falling to the floor. Crazy twanging noises mingled with the explosion's echoes. Mabel started to giggle.

We all jumped up and ran toward the music room. The door was blown off its hinges. Through the stinky smoke we saw the big grand piano was a broken mess of splintered wood and metal strands. The floor was littered with broken records.

Trigger's face turned sour, looked as if it were going to cry. "You dumb bastard," he said to Mabel, "look what you done to the hi-fi."

The hi-fi was now lo-fi; in fact, it was no-fi. It was a crumbled hunk of junk.

"I was tired of hearing *Stardust,*" Mabel said. "You with that music give me a big pain."

Trigger didn't get his name because he looks like Roy Roger's horse. His fingers started twitching. Mabel looked at Trigger's mean face and then down at the twitching fingers. He stretched his own pink, cupid's-bow lips in a smile.

"The hi-fi kept us from going nuts," Trigger said. "This hole is worse than stir!"

Mabel shrugged daintily. "So we need change. So I gave us change. Where's my thanks?"

Trigger stepped toward Mabel and grabbed his silk shirt. "You know I like music," he said. "You done it deliberate."

Mabel smiled, but his hand was sneaking into his knife pocket.

Booze and all, Pop saw it.

"Separate them," he said to Benny.

The muscle man pushed them apart as easily as me pushing the curtains back. They stood about ten feet apart, not saying anything, just watching each other.

"Break it up," Pop said, loud and strong. He was boozing too much, but he was still boss. Trigger and Mabel knew it, too. "Come on," Pop said. "Eat."

Sullen, Trigger and Mabel go back to the dining room.

"What's wrong with you guys?" Pop said. "Here I find you the best hideout anybody ever had. You're living like millionaires, with swimming pools and two-dollar cigars and brandy and frozen pheasant. So what the hell more do you want?"

"You know what we want," Trigger said. "A month is a long time. I'm a healthy guy."

"I know," Pop said. "But it's risky."

"It's either that, or we cut out," Mabel said.

"We can't leave yet." Pop frowned thoughtfully. "They don't forget 400 gees that fast. It takes more'n a month."

"They'll never forget it," Mabel said. "Use your head."

Pop gave Mabel an annoyed look. "We agreed from the start," Pop said. "Remember? Three months of lying low without a move. They don't find a trace of us because there ain't any trace to find. After that we go our separate ways."

"Two months more?" Mabel said. "We'll never make it."

Right along I'd thought they were all having fun in this swell millionaire's castle, but all of a sudden everybody looked like they was in prison.

"I'll think about it," Pop said.

"The kid can go," Mabel said. "He's clean."

"Sure," I said. I wasn't certain what they were driving at, but I had nothing to do with the robbery. Or with killing the two guards. I was clean. The only reason I was there was that I was all Pop had in the world, and he wanted to keep an eye on me. He was a good father to me I thought.

"I'll think about it," Pop said. He looked at me. I sat up straighter, trying to look older than fifteen. "Go upstairs and feed the old geezer," Pop said to me.

I filled a plate with beans and the half-cooked frozen pheasant. Benson did the cooking, and half-way through he always got impatient.

"That old man upstairs is a menace," Mabel said.

"The old man wouldn't hurt a fly," Benson said. He burped, and threw some bones on the marble floor, that was all messy with garbage.

"He might escape. He can finger us."

"Leave him alone," Pop said.

But Mabel tagged along with me to the upstairs room, where I unlocked the door and shoved the plate on the table for the little white-haired old man. He tottered over to the table.

"Thank you, Johnny," he said politely.

"How come he knows your name?" Mabel said.

"I told him."

"Bright boy." Mabel looked at the old man, who was picking quietly at his food. "How long you work in this dump?"

"I've been caretaker for Mr.

Wallace for thirty years," the old guy said. He looked coolly at Mabel. "Invading this home is bad enough, but what really shocks me is the way you mistreat its beauty. It's full of priceless objects of art. Some of them are masterpieces. When Mr. Wallace comes back from Europe next spring, he'll be heartbroken. Heartbroken," he repeated sadly, shaking his head. I thought he was going to cry.

"You sure there isn't any dough stashed away here?"

"I've told you a hundred times, no."

"Maybe you lied a hundred times, yes?"

The old man sighed. Mabel shoved me toward the door. "Run along, kid. I want to talk personal with the old man."

A funny light twinkled in Mabel's eyes, as if little fires were lit behind them. "I'll wait," I said.

He pushed me harder, at the same time jabbing my heart with two stiff fingers. It hurt. "Then wait outside," he said.

I went outside. As I left I noticed Mabel had pulled out his handkerchief, and was rolling it up into a little rope.

I waited in the hall, and suddenly there was a strange gurgling noise, and the sound of scuffling inside. I started to open the door, but I thought of the little fires in Mabel's eyes, and turned around.

I went back to the dining room, and pecked at my food. After awhile Mabel sauntered in, as if he'd been out for a Sunday stroll in the park. He was tucking his handkerchief into his breast pocket. Mabel was the only one of us who dressed carefully every morning. He always smelled of cologne.

"Guess what?" he said. "We'll have to be very careful eating pheasant."

Pop looked at him suspiciously. "Why?"

Mabel sighed. "Poor old man, he just choked to death on a bone. Quite a sight." He pretended to shudder. "His eyes looked like they were coming out on stalks."

Pop jumped up. He heaved an empty wine bottle through a stained glass window. For a second I thought he'd go for Mabel. But Pop had something else on his mind. For a long time he just stood still, scowling at the ashes of a bonfire Benson had made on the floor the night he toasted marshmallows.

"Okay, boys," Pop finally said. "We need a change. God knows we got the dough to afford it. I'll send Johnny for some women."

Trigger and Benson jumped around and cheered like schoolkids. Mabel took out his comb and delicately sleeked down his shiny hair.

Pop took me off into another room, so we could be alone.

"You know the score, Johnny," he said. "The boys are building too much steam. They're gonna explode, especially Mabel—"

"But does Mabel *really* like girls?"

"That's a funny question. Course he likes girls. Mabel's no queer; he's just—different."

"Yeah," I said. "I've watched him throw darts. He sure likes to stick 'em in women—"

"Cut the bull," Pop said impatiently. He gave me the keys to the Ford. "Be careful driving into the city."

"Can't I take the Cadillac?"

"So you can show off? Unh-unh. Suppose me and the boys gotta make a getaway?"

He swigged more whisky. Pop always drank heavy, but never this much. Maybe he needed diversion, too. I was a little annoyed at him, and the gang too. Here we had the swellest hideout ever, and the most fun, and now they wanted to louse it up, just for women.

I took a wad of bills from Pop, listened to instructions. I had to contact a doll named Lily, mention Pop's name, wave the money under her nose, and explain she'd better pack as if for a long trip, and also bring a girl friend.

"Two months," Pop said. "They'll make five thousand apiece, and live like queens." I whistled at the price. Pop grinned, and ruffled my hair. "It's better than us cutting each other's throats," he said. "Now get going."

It was a relief to wheel down the long blacktop road away from the mansion. I drove almost a mile before I reached the gate to the Wallace estate. I had to be careful there. Nobody was supposed to be on the Wallace place but the old caretaker, and we'd learned that he spent months at a time on the estate without budging. He sure wouldn't budge now.

Luckily, the estate was on a quiet country road, without a soul in sight. I opened the gate, drove out, closed the gate, and

headed for the city, two hours away.

In the city, I contacted Lily. She was a pretty blonde, but kind of old, thirty maybe. And she had a voice that sounded like grinding gears.

When she heard Pop's name, and saw the dough, she went for the deal all the way. "I got just the girl, honey," she said to me. She patted my cheeks like I was three years old. "And how about you? Wouldn't you like a playmate?"

I brushed off her hand, and gave her a hard look. "You'll do," I said, tough. She raised her eyebrows, pulled back, and that was that.

Inside of a half-hour, Lily and her friend were packed and ready to go. The friend, a slim girl with big wet brown eyes and curly black hair, slid in beside me. Nina was only a couple of years older than me. She gave me a big smile and started to chatter. She looked like a high school cheer leader.

"You're cute," she said. She was sitting between me and Lily. Her body felt warm and soft. "I like the way your nose turns up. Are the others as cute as you?"

I told her about Mabel. He was supposed to be a very handsome guy. She sounded interested. I hoped he'd get Lily instead.

Nina babbled on like somebody going on a vacation. "Swimming pool, tennis court. Gosh, it sounds swell. Will you teach me to play tennis, Johnny?"

I'd be glad to teach her anything. Driving with her at my side felt good, like having a date. Except at the end of the ride, I knew there'd be Trigger and Mabel.

I expected them all to be drunk, but Pop had cracked down. He'd decided this wasn't going to start out like a crazy orgy. If the girls were going to stay with us two months, we had to get started on a civilized basis. At least that's the way he explained it to me.

Pop, Trigger, Benson, and Mabel were lined up to greet us. They were all clean-shaven and wore fresh shirts. Trigger wore a flower in his lapel. Soon as he saw Nina he looked like a sick cow. Tough with a gun, he was a sentimental slob any woman could twist like a pretzel.

Benson shuffled his feet and grinned. He got red, when Lily touched his muscles and gasped in admiration.

"Greetings, girls," Pop said, dignified. "After a few cocktails we'll have a nice dinner."

Mabel stepped forward and took Nina by the hand. The little fires danced in his pretty blue eyes. "You're mine," he said.

He led her toward the dining room. Trigger took Lily by the arm and followed. It seemed they all had drawn for first choice, and Mabel won.

So the drinking and the dinner party started. I could hardly keep my eyes off Nina and Mabel. I couldn't get it into my head, she was what she was.

Pop drank heavy, watched the proceedings poker-faced. Benson, restless without a woman, went into his champagne popping routine again. I was the target, of course. Lily thought it was a scream. Everybody drank fast, as if they were in a hurry. Trigger had dug up an old phonograph and soon it was wheezing out dance tunes. Trigger got soupy-faced, as he glued himself to Lily and glided about the floor.

Mabel sat quietly. He was studying Nina like she was a bug. She squirmed a little as she sipped her highball. And Mabel went right on looking her over.

Trigger kept busy dancing with Lily. Pop just sat there drinking. With nothing to do, Benson started getting dinner ready.

Benson really shot the works in his raid on the big deep freezers. He brought out lobsters and strawberries and roast beef and apple pie. It wasn't bad. For a change he'd been patient enough to cook everything thoroughly. We all pitched in except Mabel. He was still studying Nina, thinking his own private thoughts, and she was trying to ignore him.

Mabel leaned toward her while she was eating some of the roast beef. "You look like a Mex," he said. "Some kinda half-breed greaser."

She flushed again. "I'm Spanish descent."

"You're a greaser. But that's okay. I like hot stuff."

She looked down silently at her plate.

"Greasers like hot stuff, too," Mabel said. He doused her beef with sauce from a little red bottle. "Try that." She didn't move. "Go ahead," he said softly. "It's just a nice little sauce. You'll like it."

Mabel sounded friendly, sincere; his voice practically ca-

ressed her. Doubtful, half trusting him, Nina forked some of the sauced-up beef into her mouth.

A second later she was sputtering, moaning, choking, grabbing for water. Tears streamed from her eyes.

"Gee, I'm awful sorry," Mabel said, pretending to be surprised. "I thought greasers liked hot stuff, honest."

Trying to put out the fire in her throat, she gulped down a quart of water. Mabel leaned back, shaking his head sorrowfully, and lit up a cigar—one of those strong little black twisted ropes.

He stroked Nina's bare arm gently. "I apologize, kid," he said. "That was rough on you, doll. I really apologize."

Nina looked at him cautiously "No more jokes. Please!"

"You're too luscious to spoil. I want to save you for dessert."

The phonograph was playing *Bolero,* that long sexy thing with the heavy beat. Trigger had pushed aside his food and was nuzzling Lily. With his eyes on Nina, Mabel puffed deeply on his stinking cigar.

Suddenly Mabel bent over and kissed Nina, hard. Her arms went up obediently about his neck—then stiffened. She fell back, coughing, gasping, clutching at her throat. Blue smoke puffed out of her mouth. Mabel had blown a smelly cloud into her.

Mabel watched, the little blue fires dancing in his eyes. I'd liked to have slugged him, but I didn't dare.

Nina stopped coughing. She looked at Mabel, her big dark eyes just as dangerous as his.

"Dance?" he said. The *Bolero* was still thumping away.

"No."

"Five grand, and you won't dance?" Mabel shook his neat little head. "My, my. We'll have to do something about that."

You couldn't blame her for being scared. She rose. Slowly, she began to move in rhythm to the music. Mabel released her wrist.

"Wake it up, wake it up," he said. Nina moved a little faster. She began to move her slim body like a snake.

Mabel hooked his finger in the neck of her close-fitting black dress, and pulled. The top of the dress split down to her waist.

"God damn you!" she shouted trying to hold the ripped cloth about her. "This is my

favorite dress, you bastard!"

"You look better without it."

Concerned, Lily called over from her perch on Trigger's lap. "You shouldn't a done that, Mabel," she said. "Nina just bought it."

Nina's eyes were bright, but she wasn't crying. She was hating, ready to kill. She glared at Mabel. He smiled prettily. He was getting what he wanted.

"Nina, honey," Lily said nervously. "There's a big sewing outfit in that room to the right. I saw it when I powdered my nose."

Nina ran to the room. The door clicked behind her. Mabel sauntered after her. He tried the door, but it was locked.

"Open up," he said.

She must have started to cry. Her voice was muffled, choked with tears and anger at the same time. "Go to hell. I'm sewing."

"Open up," Mabel repeated. When there was no answer, he smiled. He walked toward the glass doors that led to the terrace.

I drifted outside after him, sneaking behind the shrubs. Mabel peeked in Nina's window. Whether she was sewing or crying, she didn't see him. He hoisted himself onto the sill and stepped into the room.

I should have stayed away. Instead, I padded up to the window and peeked in, too. Nina was seated on the bed, a sewing kit scattered about her, a scissors in her hand. Her big eyes looked up at Mabel, strolling toward her, pulling his belt off. He whistled the belt around his head and giggled.

I ran from the window and sat under a tree near the parking space. Why did a guy want a woman, when he hated women?

I heard a sharp crack, and then another, and a couple more. I stuffed my fingers in my ears.

Just the same, I heard the scream.

I picked up a rock and ran toward the window. But the scream hadn't come from Nina. She was scrambling out of the window. The scissors in her hand was stained bright red. She looked at it, dropped it.

I helped her to the ground. She was shaking; her white skin was cold. "Please," she muttered. "Help me—"

I stuffed the keys to the Ford in her hand and pointed at the car. She pecked a kiss at my cheek, ran to the Ford.

I walked back inside, trying to look calm. Alerted by the yell, Pop and Benson were battering at the locked door with chairs. When it finally gave way, they rushed in.

Trigger hovered over Lily, trying to control her panic. "She'll be all right," he muttered.

Then Trigger heard the roar of the Ford, saw it shoot down the driveway. His face turned chalky.

"Christ!" he cried. "The dame was driving!"

"Thank God!" Lily said. "It wasn't Nina who screamed."

"Our hideout," Trigger said. "It's shot."

"Don't worry," Lily said. "Nina will never tell the cops."

Pop and Benson were muttering inside the other room.

"We can't take a chance," Trigger said. "We'll have to blow this palace—and I'm glad."

Pop came to the doorway. He looked stony sober.

"How's Mabel?" I said.

"Start packing," he said. "Load the Caddy."

"But how's Mabel?"

"We can stop the bleeding. It will live."

"It?"

"Guess that's what you'd call it." He hesitated. "But Mabel's a lot more fitting tag than it used to be."

The *Bolero* had whined to a halt, and the needle was scratching away in the silence. I climbed upstairs and started to pack. It was our last day in the swell house where we all had so much fun.

● ● ●

TRIAL-RUN

Daniel DeBlick, given permission by a Pompton Lakes, New Jersey automobile agency to take a 1954 convertible for a spin around the block, apparently got carried away on his test-run.

The car was given a thorough tryout by DeBlick. He was picked up 300 miles away.

fast with a gun

"I want to know, Marty," he said. "And after you tell me, maybe I won't kill you."

BY
WILLIAM SCHWARTZ

Meeghan stood about five feet in front of me and pointed the black hole of his forty-five on a straight line with my head.

"I want to know, Marty," he said. "And after you tell me, maybe I won't kill you."

He wasn't kidding. That was one thing you always knew about Meeghan, he didn't kid. Maybe he was a big man and maybe he hired a gun to take care of his light work, but when it was a personal matter, Meeghan took the job himself and never made jokes. A personal matter, to him, was something like this—twenty thousand in cash stolen from the safe in his home and lying in a satchel next to the bed I was sitting on.

"You know I always work alone," I said. "This was no different. It was me, just me did the job."

"Sorry, Marty, I won't buy it." The forty-five was looking bigger now and a hell of a lot closer. "I haven't seen you since '54. So someone told you about that money. Who?"

This was going to be a rough one to get out of. I was caught. A neighbor had seen me leaving Meeghan's home and got enough of a look at me, for Meeghan to know who it was. If Meeghan had been two hours more getting to me, I'd have been gone. I had figured this to be the end of dingy furnished rooms and lousy food, but now it looked like it was the end of me. If I kept talking maybe he'd relax his guard. I didn't have any choice.

"It was nobody," I said. "I just heard some talk about the dough and decided to have a look. That's all."

"Once more. I'll ask you once more and then that's it.

Who set this up? Who told you about the money?"

I was sweating. "Like I said—"

"Okay. You're lying. And I'm going to give it to you."

"Meeghan! Hang on! I—I might tell—"

"I'll find out for myself. You get it."

He'd have killed me then if he hadn't heard the choked-off sob that came from the closet. He shot at the closet's partially opened door. He was ready to shoot anyway and he just flicked his wrist and shot twice at the closet, watching the door swing open and the body pitch out onto the floor.

I dove at him. It was my only chance, and I had to be fast. I knocked him against the wall, smashed my fist into his face with all I had. He went down in a heap.

This wasn't going to be my murder; it was going to be his rap and he could talk his way out of it. Me, I was getting out of the country with twenty thousand and no more strings attached. It was one of those lucky breaks, I suppose. Meeghan was never so slow with a gun. Ordinarily, he could have killed me, too. But this time, he wasn't fast enough.

He didn't see me coming, because he was too busy trying to figure out why the dead body lying face up on the floor was his wife.

COPS WILL BE COPS

Bill Barker noticed as he left the professional building in Denver, Colorado that a policeman was preparing to give him an over-time parking ticket.

He called to the policeman, who looked up to see Barker coming diagonally across the street towards him.

Barker's attempt to stop the pen-wielding policeman was fruitless. And he got a $2 ticket—for jaywalking.

They found Jerry babbling like a moronic baby, the dead girl's sightless eyes staring up at him.

the dead girl walked

BY JASON JANUARY

Everybody said that Jerry knew how to live. He was a business-machine operator, and a good one, but he never held a job very long. After a few months' work, he would be off, travelling on a shoestring, to Canada, Louisiana, once as far as Mexico, now and then working for a few days on a ranch, lumber-camp or shrimp boat, and one day he would pop up back in town, looking tan and healthy. He never made an enemy—not with his hearty, easy manner—and women adored him. Wherever he worked, he got a girl the first thing, sometimes several. They knew that it wouldn't last long, but they never resented this, nor the fact that he never spent much money on them or arranged the expensive dates most girls expect, because he brought them glamour, something they could remember all their lives. Being

with Jerry was like a dream—his girl friends were children again, for a short time, happy and carefree and romantic.

One morning—it was the first of November—they found him sitting in his doorway, babbling and slobbering like a moronic baby. There was a girl sprawled on the floor beside him, dead, her sightless eyes staring up at him.

Jerry's home was in New York, but one summer he found himself in a mid-western city with only two dollars to his name. He invested fifty cents in a room at a flop-house and went to bed early, but first he talked the landlady into lending him an iron and he washed out his one shirt and pressed his suit. The next morning he pressed the shirt, shaved and dressed, and by eight o'clock he was drinking coffee in a cafeteria and reading the want-ads in the paper. He was a good talker and by noon he had a job, even without any references. That evening he had a date with a girl in the office named Harriet. He went home with her, to her little duplex apartment, and she cooked dinner for him. The next day he moved in with her.

Jerry figured he'd stay in town for a couple weeks, until he got enough money together to go back home, but several months later, when the leaves began to turn yellow and brown and fall off the trees, he was still there. The reason was Harriet. She was about twenty-five years old, tall and slender with a good body and long, dark hair and beautiful gray eyes. But she added up to more than these items. It was something he couldn't put his finger on—as if she had a secret, as if there was some satisfaction in her life that she was withholding from him. Whatever it was, it fascinated him, and even bothered him a little.

Then one evening in October she smiled at him with her strange, haunting smile, and told him that she was going to have a baby.

This sort of thing had happened to Jerry before. In fact, on several occasions, it had inspired him to take trips to other parts of the country. But it was different, now, partly because he wasn't ready to leave Harriet, and partly because he felt, for some reason, a kind of responsibility for her.

He went to see his friend Marvin. Marvin was a skinny, slightly hunch-backed, little clerk in the office, an unobtru-

sive little man that nobody had paid much attention to until Jerry came along. But the two of them struck up a friendship for some reason. Jerry realized that Marvin had a lot of good sense, and he had to admit that he was flattered by the way Marvin followed him around—like a dog, almost worshipping him.

In this instance, Marvin began acting like Jerry's conscience. "Nobody wants responsibilities," he said, "but everybody has them, and you can't run away from them all your life."

One thing Jerry refused to do was get married, and finally Harriet agreed to have an operation. Marvin really came in handy, now. He found a good, sure doctor, and took care of all the arrangements. It was going to cost four hundred dollars, which Jerry thought was a bit steep, but Marvin insisted that they go to the best man available.

The last night before the operation was frustrating for Jerry. Even though Harriet made love to him passionately, several times, it seemed as if only her body was there, as if the rest of her was off somewhere else, far away, where he could never go.

Harriet went to the doctor by herself, so that nobody else would be involved. Inside her pocket book was a card with a phone number on it, to be called only in case something went wrong. It was the number of Marvin's phone.

The operation took place on Halloween afternoon. Jerry and Marvin sat in Marvin's tiny, cluttered apartment, passing a bottle of whiskey back and forth between them, waiting for the phone to ring and for Harriet to say that everything was all taken care of.

To keep their minds off the operation, they told jokes and talked about women. "Did I ever tell you that I was married once?" Marvin asked suddenly.

Jerry tried not to look surprised, "No, I never knew that."

"It was some time ago. I was already past thirty, but the girl was only eighteen. She married me partly to get away from an unhappy family situation, and I knew that I wouldn't have her forever, but I think we made a good thing out of it, while it lasted."

"What was she like?"

"She was almost beautiful. We must've looked awfully

strange together. She was much taller than me, for one thing. But I was madly in love with her; I mean really in love. I'd have been glad to die for her in a minute. Finally, she left—we both knew she'd have to, because I wasn't man enough for her—but I never resented her going. She gave me the happiest days of my life, and I think I gave her the experience of being loved unselfishly, something few women have, even from a man who's inadequate."

"Do you ever see her?" Jerry asked, taking a pull from the bottle.

"Yes, often. We never speak much. We don't have to—we know."

"And do you still love her?"

"Of course," Marvin said.

The afternoon wore on. The time had come when they should already have heard. Jerry was beginning to get a little high, but the whiskey didn't seem to have much effect on Marvin.

"I wonder if something could have happened?" Jerry asked, pacing back and forth though the room was small.

"Not much chance, not with a doctor who's sanitary and knows what he's doing. She wasn't very far gone, was she?"

"No, only about a month."

The phone rang about five o'clock. It wasn't Harriet; it was the doctor. His words were clipped, short and frantic. He told them that Harriet was dead.

Part of the arrangement with the doctor had been that Jerry would have to take care of the body, in case anything like this happened. "You can't duck out on it," Marvin told him. "If the doc gets caught, you know he'll drag us in with him."

They drove in Marvin's car to a strange neighborhood where they bought a pick and two shovels, then to the doctor's office on the edge of town.

The doctor was a thin, pale-faced man with a little moustache, he jerked and fidgeted like a bird. He was playing it cool all the way. "The dirty linen I called you about, gentlemen," he said, pointing to a bulky laundry bag in the corner. Jerry strained to pick the bag up, feeling the still warm flesh next to his back after he slung the bag over his shoulder and as he carried it out to the car. The same flesh that only the night before he had caressed and desired.

Marvin drove for over an hour, until he was a good fifty miles from town. He drove over back country roads, finally

stopping in woods, on what was hardly more than a path.

The first thing Jerry said, since they had left town, was, "You seem to know the country out here real well."

"I used to come out here on picnics," Marvin said, "with my wife."

Marvin carried the pick and shovels back in the woods about a hundred feet. Jerry followed with the body. Once he tripped on something and fell down, landing partway on the body. His hand touched one of its breasts, and he pulled away in horror, as if it were a venomous snake.

They dug down about three feet, then they opened the laundry bag.

Harriet was wearing all the clothes she'd worn when she'd gone to the doctor. Even her handbag was there. Except for the disheveled condition of her hair and clothing, she looked very much as she might any morning, on her way to work. Jerry tried to tidy her up as much as he could, running his fingers through the thick dark hair and smoothing out her jacket and skirt. An orange moon was climbing in the sky, and by its light he could see her gray eyes, wide open and staring.

Suddenly he wanted to get Harriet covered up as quickly as possible. His first shovel of dirt hit her in the face, filling her eyehollows and getting into her nostrils and mouth. After they'd shovelled all the dirt back, they stamped down the mound as much as they could and covered it over with twigs and pine needles.

Jerry looked up at the moon —there seemed to be a face in it, grinning at him. "It's Halloween," he said.

About halfway to town they drove off on another dirt road and ditched the pick and shovels. Most of the way home, Jerry thought about Harriet. For the first time in his life he really missed someone, and he wished that she were still alive and back with him. But most of all, perhaps, he wanted to know her secret that he had known only as a quality, an aura. Finally, he thought about Marvin and remembered how much he owed him.

"You really shouldn't have done it," he said. "Do you know what can happen to you if they find out?"

Marvin shrugged his shoulders. "Look at me. It doesn't make much difference to a guy like me whether he's in jail or out. I might as well help out a

buddy when he needs it, because there isn't much I can do for myself."

A while later he said, "Look, somebody's going to report her missing sooner or later, and you'd better figure out an alibi. They'll find out you were living together."

"Yeah. I was figuring on going home, anyhow. I'll say we had a fight and she took off for her mother's or someplace, so I left the next day, since it was her house and all." Jerry shook his head sadly. "Man, I wish it hadn't happened. You know, last night I was just about to ask her to forget the operation and all and marry me, but I chickened out, for some reason. Now I feel like a murderer!"

"Look," Marvin said, "the doc explained it was something about the way she was constructed. She probably would've died anyway, if she'd had the kid. Nothing lasts forever anyhow—four months, four years. What does it matter in the end? Take my advice and have a few drinks. Then try to get some sleep."

"Won't you come in and have a few shots?" Jerry asked when they pulled up in front of Harriet's duplex.

"Golly, I hate to beg off," Marvin said, "but I'm really beat. Besides, I've got a couple letters to write."

"Okay," Jerry said. "Look, Marv. Thanks. Thanks a hell of a lot!"

"Don't mention it." Then, as he drove away, Marvin called back, "Happy Halloween!"

While he sat alone, drinking whiskey from a bottle, the fact that it was Halloween began to bother Jerry. "I've got to watch myself," he thought. "I can't let a holiday connected with a lot of superstitions get my goat." He could hear the kids running around through the neighborhood, h o o t i n g and making a racket generally, and after awhile they came and knocked on his door. There were three of them, covered with sheets to make them look like ghosts, standing on the porch. He gave them a dollar bill and told them to go away.

After that he sat in the bedroom, drinking from the bottle. Several times kids knocked on his door, but he ignored them. Then he must have dozed off, because he suddenly sat up with a start, covered with sweat. He had been dreaming that Harriet was coming to get him, walking blindly with her eye-hollows full of dirt and with dirt trailing from her

mouth and nostrils. He shook his head to try to snap himself back to reality and reached for the bottle; then he heard it. There *was* a knocking, just as he'd dreamed, slow and deliberate! He sat there; his hand trembled as he gulped down a slug of whiskey. "Those damn kids!" he said.

But there was something about this knocking that was different from the way the kids had knocked. It continued with the same measured sonority, with a hypnotic insistence that at last drew Jerry from his chair and to the door. He opened the door a crack and squinted out, but he could see nothing. "Maybe they went away," he thought.

Then he opened the door wider, and he started back with a gasp, beads of sweat breaking out on his white forehead.

There was a girl standing there in front of him, leaning slightly foreward. It was Harriet. But her face was clear—all the dirt had been washed from her eyes and mouth and nostrils and brushed from her hair and clothes. Her gray eyes were wide open and staring straight at him, but now they were the gray of lead. She smiled at him, and her personal secret was still there in the eyes and smile. Her hand dropped slowly along the door and touched him on the shoulder, and they stood that way for an instant. Jerry screamed then, and the body that had been propped against his door toppled over on top of him, bearing him to the floor with it.

Afterwards, the neighbors remembered hearing the scream, but at the time they thought it was the kids, playing some sort of Halloween prank. When they finally found him the next morning, he was sitting on the floor with the corpse, staring vacantly around with his blue eyes, muttering things which nobody could understand and drooling like a baby.

In the course of the investigation, the police questioned Jerry's friends, including Marvin. "Did you know the girl?" they asked him.

He answered impatiently. "Of course I did. She was my ex-wife."

● ● ●

visit by night

Trainor had scorned plenty of women — afterwards. He should have known this one might be more difficult to please.

BY STUART JAMES

John Trainor lived along the river on the fringe of the town. From the shoulder of Canal Street, where a mail box bore his name, six wooden steps dropped down to a narrow path which curved through a grouping of lilac bushes, some small dogwoods and tall uncut grass. At the end of this path was the small one-room cabin of rustic design which, being an artist, he called his studio.

Suddenly awakening from a light sleep, he listened for a sound. There was nothing. He held his breath, but the dark room was heavy with silence. Raising himself on one elbow, he trained his eyes on the black area near the door. He had the feeling that someone was in the room. It was a strange premonition, and it made his heart beat wildly.

He listened a full minute, planning all the while what he would do should a figure lunge at him out of the darkness. The room was a large rectangle. His painting easel was at one end; a drafting table and high stool were along the wall. His bed was along the opposite wall and the single door, which he never locked, was at one end. He imagined that he could reach the table and use the stool as a weapon, switching on the light that was there in a split-second motion. He ran this defensive plan through his mind as he lay there in the darkness and listened.

Finally, he decided he had been imagining things, and

snuggled his head into the pillow.

But the feeling was still there, the oppressive half-knowledge that someone was in the room. Then a sound broke the silence, a slight, imperceptible sound of a foot scraping against a board. His muscles constricted. Undeniably, someone was in the room. His eyes riveted to the space near the door, he imagined the shadowy bulk of a standing figure.

The instant he decided to act, he leaped from the bed and made a lunge across the room for the high stool and the light switch.

"Don't turn on the light!"

He stopped, his hand on the switch. It was a female voice, soft, but desperate, a voice vaguely familiar.

"Don't turn on the light!" she repeated, her identity still shrouded by the darkness.

"Who is it?" he asked, a tinge of anger mixed with relief in his voice.

"Betty," she answered.

"Betty?"

"Betty Weinmer."

"Oh," he said, placing her voice now. "Why don't you want the light on?"

"I—I just don't."

He walked across the room and sat on the edge of the bed. She stepped away from the wall and he could see her now, after a fashion. "What the hell are you doing here?" he asked.

"I wanted to see you," she answered.

"You see me everyday," he said. "Every morning at the coffee shop."

"That's different," she said, a note of nervousness to her voice. She sat on the bed.

John Trainor noted the odor of whiskey. "You've been drinking," he said.

"Just a little. I was afraid to come here. I had planned it, but I needed something to—to. . ." She did not finish.

"I'll be damned," John Trainor said, the words coming on the crest of a laugh.

"Don't laugh," she said, her voice tight, "Please don't laugh. You don't know how hard this is."

"I'm not really laughing," he said soberly. "It's just that it's—well, it's odd. You know, your coming here this time of night."

She didn't answer. Well, he thought, this beats all, Never more than a "good morning" or a smile to this girl and she turns up here in the dark, full

of whiskey and aching to get into bed with him. But he was not surprised. Women—of all shapes and sizes—came to him, and he often expounded on this fact, pointing out that most women, to fulfill a creative urge, were eager to "mother" a starving young artist.

Being an opportunist, he now thought, *Well, what the hell, might as well make the most of this.*

"What did you want to see me about?" he asked, amused.

"I—I just couldn't stand it anymore," she muttered.

"What?" He was enjoying her discomfiture. "I didn't hear you. Speak up."

"I couldn't stand it," she blurted, a frantic pitch to her voice. "I had to be alone with you. I—I wanted to talk to you."

"Is that all?"

"Don't torture me. I've never done anything like this before. I don't know what—I—I..."

His hand ran over her shoulder and across her back. He felt the sudden tension in her. He pulled her down to the bed and kissed her. She clung to him greedily, like a person dying of thirst stumbling into a stream.

Later, lying next to her, he felt the same amusement and revulsion he felt for all the women who came to him, thinking that their sounds and utterances of passion were of a single pattern.

"You won't even look at me tomorrow," she said.

"What are you talking about?" he said, knowing what was coming next, the self-pity, wishing that she'd shut her mouth and leave.

"Tomorrow," she said. "Tomorrow you won't want to be seen with me. You can get anyone you want. You won't want to even talk to me."

"That's not true," he said, feeling anger because of the truth of her statement.

"But why should you?" she went on. "Nobody does. I'm just Betty, that they smile at."

"Oh, come on," he said, "You're just imagining all this. Everyone likes you."

"Oh sure," she said, "But they don't want to take me out, to be seen with me. They don't mind me for this sort of thing. Just so long as nobody sees them."

"You're wrong," he lied, hoping to end the discussion. "You just imagine this. I don't feel that way at all."

"You don't?" she said hopefully.

"Of course not. What kind of a person do you think I am?"

"You'll take me out?" she asked, turning to face him. "Go dancing or something, or to a movie?"

"Why not?" he said, ready to say anything to shut her up.

"Tomorrow night," she said, excited. "I'll pick you up."

"Well," he said, "I'm afraid I'm short of cash this week and I—"

"I have money!"

"Well...I...look, let's talk about it tomorrow. It's late as hell now. You better go on home and I'll see you tomorrow."

She was silent for a long moment. "You don't want to," she said quietly.

"Sure I want to, but it's late. I have to get some sleep. We'll talk about it tomorrow."

She leaned over the side of the bed, groped for her handbag. Her hand rummaged inside the large leather bag.

Now she has to primp and comb her hair, he thought. Why the hell can't she just go and do that at home?

She rolled back to her side, facing him. "Good-bye," she said softly. He didn't answer. She slid over until her body covered him. "You're like all the rest," she said.

The sharp pain in his chest brought a choked gasp to his throat. He grasped her shoulders, tried to push her away, but the weight of her two-hundred pounds pushed the long blade of the hunting knife in to its hilt.

●●●

DRINK AND BARE IT

A Dallas husband complained in a divorce court that his wife drank too much.

She had to drink, the wife told the judge, to keep from being embarrassed.

Her spouse, a nudist, insisted she attend the nudist meetings with him.

Either the cops or Marcus would get him. This was the only play he could make.

The clock over the cigar counter indicated that it was 10:12. Luke glanced at it as he walked through the lobby of the Borg Building and approached the elevators. His finger had scarcely touched the up button outside the first car, when the doors slid back. Five people got out and hurried into the lobby. Luke waited for them to pass, then stepped in. An elderly woman with a silver fox piece over her shoulder entered behind him.

"Thirteen," she told the operator, a pimply-faced youth in a maroon uniform.

"Same," said Luke. "Thirteen."

After a moment's wait, the boy slid the outer door and the inner grill shut. The car shot upwards. Luke noticed that his palms were moist. He was nervous, but not afraid. More exhilarated than anything else.

The elevator stopped smoothly at the thirteenth floor. Luke let the woman precede him into the hall and followed her down it. She entered a door on the left. Luke continued and stopped at the last door on the right. Black letters on its frosted pane spelled J. Howard Hamilton, Attorney at Law.

After opening the door, Luke closed it with care behind him and waded across thick red carpeting toward the receptionist, a pale, blonde. There was no one else in the room.

"My name is Fairchild, Roger Fairchild." Luke's voice was a precise, low monotone. "I have an appointment."

The blonde smiled and showed polished teeth between carefully rouged lips. "Yes, Mr. Fairchild," she said, "Mr. Hamilton is busy at the moment. He will see you in just a few minutes. Won't you sit down?"

BY CHARLES DIXON

luke's last play

Luke's appointment was for 10:15. He had timed his entrance almost to the second and didn't like the idea of waiting. He thought of a sarcastic remark, but didn't say it—or anything. Instead, he sat down in a plush armchair and picked up a magazine from the table beside it. He hadn't removed his hat. Its blue brim was low over his eyes.

At 10:21 a door marked Private opened. A short, heavy man carrying a small tool kit came through the room. Luke watched him over the top of the magazine, saw him go out the door to the hall.

The blonde clicked a switch on her desk. "Mr. Fairchild to see you, sir." She clicked it again and told Luke "You may go in now."

Luke dropped the magazine back onto the table as he arose. He entered the door the heavy-set man had just come out of and closed it softly. The deep red carpeting was here, too. Luke stood just inside the room and flicked his glance quickly about it, never losing sight of its sole occupant.

He walked toward the desk in the center of the room under the windows. His footsteps were inaudible. The man behind the desk dropped the paper he was studying into a wire basket. He looked up at Luke, fixed a smile on his face, and started to speak.

Luke cut him off. "Are you J. Howard Hamilton, attorney at law, once known as Joe the Fix?"

The lawyer's smile seeped back into his face. His hands gripped the desk edge. Luke saw a ruby ring on the right hand's little finger. And he saw the man's fright.

"I said, are you Hamilton?"

Dark veins stood out in bas-relief at the lawyer's temple. He nodded hesitantly.

Luke's right hand slipped beneath his coat and closed on the grip of the .45. He thumbed down its safety catch as he withdrew it from the holster. He felt cool, detached, as he moved the gun so that it was on a line with the attorney's head.

Hamilton's mouth was open. Fear made a strained, half-choking sound deep in his throat.

"Compliments of Mr. Marcus," said Luke. He pulled the trigger.

The slug caught the lawyer in the left eye. Its force turned the swivel chair halfway around. Hamilton slipped from

the chair, and a brighter red spilled from the wound onto the red carpet.

Luke's ears hummed, the lingering effect of the explosion. Cordite fumes burned his nostrils. He reholstered the .45 and started for the door. The receptionist opened it just as he reached it, almost ran into him. She was wide-eyed, so pale now that her lipstick was startlingly bright. Luke hit her with a chopping right to the jaw. Her head snapped to one side. The blow bounced her off the door jamb, before she hit the floor. He hoped he hadn't killed her.

Luke walked into the empty reception room, through the outer door and into the hall. The woman in the fur was just leaving the office up the hall. She appeared calm; she was obviously unaware of the shooting. Luke followed her to the elevators. She was pressing the button when he got there. The floor indicator showed the elevator to be at the twenty-fifth floor.

Luke looked back down the hall. A door across from Hamilton's office opened. A girl in nurses garb walked across the hall. Luke glanced at the indicator. It pointed to 22. The girl had opened the door and was peering into the reception room. The pointer moved to 19...18, and stopped. The nurse had gone into the reception room. The elevator was still at the eighteenth floor.

Luke felt the sweat on his shoulders turn cold. His teeth clamped tightly together. He wanted to yank out the .45, but knew he shouldn't. The woman moved restlessly, adjusted her fur piece to be doing something. The nurse hadn't come out of the office yet. The pointer began to move again, 17... 16...15, and halted.

There was a scream, piercingly shrill, at the far end of the hall. The sound angered Luke, caused him to twist about, looking for some means of escape. The woman in the fur piece was asking him, stupidly, if that hadn't been a scream. She took hesitant steps down the hall. Luke cursed softly and went for the gun. But he heard the elevator doors open behind him and hurriedly entered the car.

The elevator started down. Luke became aware of his fast, hard breathing, and tried to slow it down. The car was crowded. He tugged at his hat brim, wanting concealment,

and noticed his hands were shaking. The elevator stopped at nine; a man got in. Again at four; two women. It reached the lobby.

Luke walked quickly to the revolving doors. The cigar counter clock said 10:24. Luke was on the sidewalk. He felt like running, but controlled his pace, kept it at a brisk walk. He passed the bank that was a block from the Borg Building. He turned the corner as the bank clock chimed 10:30. Half a block down Twelfth Street, Luke stopped, opened the curb side door of a black 1950 Ford Coupe, and slid inside. As he pulled away, the parking meter showed twenty minutes parking time remained.

Luke edged the Ford into the thick mid-morning traffic. He made three green lights in a row and knew he was in the clear. He relaxed a little and lit a cigarette. It had been close, closer than ever before, and Luke had killed seven prior to this one.

Luke pulled onto the freeway and accelerated. He told himself that this one had been too damn close. He wondered what had made the nurse go into Hamilton's office? Surely, she couldn't have heard much noise from the shot through two closed doors.

Luke let out a sigh. Well, Marcus would be happy. Hamilton or Joe the Fix had worked for Marcus long before Luke came into the organization. He had gotten smart early and quit Marcus. Now he was, or had been, one of the biggest lawyers in the East. He thought he'd covered his past pretty well, but not well enough for the F.B.I. He'd ben subpoenoed to testify before a crime commission board. Marcus was afraid of what he might remember, and so Luke had made it number eight.

Luke slowed for a school zone, and smiled at the kids on the playground. He loved kids. Maybe he should have gotten married. He was able to support three wives on what Marcus paid him, but they might have wondered where the dough came from, and he couldn't have told them. Marcus wouldn't like his getting married anyway.

He had worked for Marcus since 1940. After three years in the army, he'd come back hard and cynical, just the guy Marcus needed in his push to the top. He had become Marcus' personal gun, a relation-

ship known only to the two of them. The going had been fast and tough the first few years. Now that Marcus was up there, Luke's work was very occasional. Hamilton was the first in three years.

Luke turned off the freeway onto Baxter Boulevard, drove six blocks and into the driveway of a modern, white stucco house. He put the car in the garage, and went into the house through the back door. He paused in the kitchen long enough to mix himself a drink, half Harpers, half water. In the living room, he threw off his coat and hat, loosened his tie, turned on the radio, and sat down.

The disc jockey was spinning "Old Black Magic." Luke liked that number. He lit a cigarette and really relaxed, sipping the highball leisurely. The record came to a rhythmic close. Somebody extolled the virtues of Sea Gull Soap. Then "September Song" started: "When the autumn weather turns the leaves to flame, one hasn't—." The music faded and quit altogether.

"We interrupt this program to bring you a special news bulletin. J. Howard Hamilton, prominent local attorney, was shot and killed in his downtown office this morning by an unknown gunman. The only possible eye witness, Miss Mildred Burgess, Hamilton's secretary, was found unconscious in the office. She was rushed to Mercy Hospital. Police as yet have discovered no clues. They are awaiting a possible description of the killer from Miss Burgess. The k i l l i n g occurred about 10:30 this morning. More details will be broadcast as we receive them. We return you now to recorded music."

Luke gulped the rest of the drink and went into the kitchen for a refill. That radio station was on the ball. Hamilton had only been dead an hour.

Luke sloshed whiskey into the glass and drank it straight. He added water to the next one and returned with it to the living room.

There was no more about the Hamilton job until 12:30 newscast; then they had plenty. Luke was building his fourth drink when it came on. He hurried back to the radio and listened eagerly.

"The murder is only two hours old, but police have uncovered what may be a valuable clue. A search of Hamil-

ton's office uncovered a tape recording machine in a filing cabinet near the desk. The machine was still running when discovered. Police have taken it to City Hall for a play back. They believe the killer's voice may have been recorded. According to Attorney George L. Moore, a former partner of Hamilton's who still has offices in the Borg Building, Hamilton made it a practice to record conversations with all clients because Hamilton believed a client would talk more freely if he didn't think his words were being written down. The victim's secretary, Mildred Burgess, is reported still unconscious at Mercy Hospital. Police are hopeful that she—"

Luke switched off the radio. He lit a cigarette and paced up and down the room for a short time. Then he walked into the bedroom and took the shoulder holster and gun from where he had hung them, behind the clothes in the closet. He next opened a dresser drawer and extracted a small .32 automatic. He put the holster on and cinched it tight, returned to the living room and put on his hat and coat. Slipping the .32 into his left hand coat pocket he departed.

Marcus' place was clear across town, a good two hour drive in the heavy traffic. Luke stayed just under the speed limit. He couldn't afford a speeding ticket just now. The car radio blared popular songs and commercials. Luke had just halfway to go when the two o'clock news came on.

"There is a new development in the Hamilton murder which shocked the city this morning. Mildred Burgess, the slain attorney's secretary, has regained consciousness at Mercy Hospital. She said the murderer was wearing a blue suit and light blue felt hat. She estimated his height to be six feet and his weight a hundred and eighty pounds. She said the man kept his hat on in the office. She stated further that the murderer struck her as he was about to leave Hamilton's office after the shooting. From police headquarters comes the report that ballistics experts are examining a .45 caliber shell found on the rug near Hamilton's desk. Detectives would not comment on what they had learned from Hamilton's tape recording machine which had apparently been running during

the execution of the crime. They said that—"

Of course, thought Luke, the cops aren't going to spread around what must be on that tape. Not until they put the arm on Marcus. He had to see Marcus before they did. The cops very possibly wouldn't know where to find him. Marcus had four or five places around town, but he only came to this particular one when something big was up or the heat was on. He always went there when Luke worked, and so he'd be sure to be there now.

The address was 8112 North Devon. Luke passed by it and didn't see any cars that looked like police. He parked a half block from the house. He sat there for a moment, letting the engine idle while he used the rear-view mirror. There was no activity around Marcus. He turned off the ignition and got out. The dashboard clock read 2:45.

Luke was sweating again as he walked back down the street toward Marcus'. His stomach was tight, knotted hard. He thought of going back to the car. He could go to California or Canada or Mexico, but he knew he really couldn't. Either the cops or Marcus would get him sooner or later. This was the only play he could make; his only chance. He stepped onto the porch of Marcus' neat brick house and pushed the buzzer.

The door opened on the second buzz. "Hello, Luke, come in."

"Hello, Reese," said Luke and walked by the bodyguard and into the living room.

Felder sat at the dining room table holding some cards in his hand. A filled shoulder holster hung from the back of his chair. Reese had a coat on and Luke looked for the bulge under his left arm. He saw it. Both Reese and Felder were bodyguards.

"Hi, Luke, said Felder. "Just having a game of gin, but we'll stop and play some three hand stud if you want."

"Maybe later. Where's Marcus?"

"He's in the den," said Reese. "He went in about ten minutes ago to listen to that seem-phony that comes on at 2:30. You know how he is about that longhair stuff. He probably don't want to be bothered."

"He'll see me," said Luke.

Reese shrugged. Nobody

knew what Luke did, but the boss kept him around and seemed to like him. He seemed a tough boy and therefore nobody tried to step on him. "So he'll see yuh," Reese said, and sat down opposite Felder.

Luke walked out of the living room, across a narrow hallway that led to the bedooms, and stopped at a door, behind which he could hear faint music. He knocked.

"Come in, goddamn it. It better be important."

Luke opened the door, walked through, and closed it behind him. "It's important all right," he said.

"Marcus sat in an upholstered chair, with his back to the door. Though thin to the point of emaciation, he had a ruddy complexion. The radio stood right in front of him. He half turned in the chair and looked at Luke. He reached over and snapped off the music. "Oh, it's you, Luke."

Luke walked over and stood by the big cabinet model, facing Marcus. "Been listening long?" he asked.

"I heard the news if that's what you mean. Nice going. But why'd you do it in his office in the middle of the day?"

"I don't know. Maybe I just felt like it."

"All right. Don't get in an uproar. You got away clean; that's the main thing. They'll never trace that slug to you, and you didn't let that dame get a good look at your kisser. So what do we got to worry?"

It isn't the slug or the dame I'm worried about," Luke said. "It's the tape recording." Luke slipped his left hand into his coat pocket. "I mentioned your name "Marcus," just before I shot him."

"You what!"

"That's right, Marcus. The cops have your name on that recording, punctuated by a gun shot. They're probably looking for you right now, and when they find you, they'll put you under the bright lights and sweat you. You been lucky so far, Marcus, that you've never been grilled. Somehow I don't think you're built to stand up under it."

With his right hand Luke turned the radio back on, volume low. "The way I see it, Marcus, you're through. Either way you look at it. If the cops get you, you'll talk and we'll both fry. This way you go alone."

Marcus shook a bony hand

before him, in a gesture of pleading and desperation. "Wait a minute, Luke boy. You've got it figured wrong. That's circumstantial evidence. They can't get me; I've got connections. I won't talk. I swear it!"

Luke shook his head. "Sorry." He turned the radio up high, very high. With that much volume, the Stravinski sounded like a boiler works gone mad. Marcus lunged from his chair at Luke, but Luke neatly sidestepped the charge. The loud music stopped abruptly, for Luke's foot had struck the radio plug, loosening it. Marcus was running for the door. Luke squeezed the .32 twice. The slugs ripped into Marcus' back. He fell headlong, reaching, but life had got away from him.

Luke looked around the room. No windows. He yanked the .45 from its holster and ran to the door, skirting Marcus' body. Reese was coming toward him from the living room, tugging his gun from his coat. Luke fired the .45 and spun Reese back across the hallway. Luke then ran on into the living room.

Felder's gun barked twice. Luke dropped the .32 from his left hand as he fell to his knees. Felder rushed him, still shooting. Luke fired three more times and Felder stopped short, crashed into the dining room table in the course of going down.

Luke crawled on his knees and one hand across the room, still holding onto the .45. He left a trail of blood on the rug. Though he reached the door, Luke hadn't the strength left to open it. He swayed, lost his grip on the knob, and dropped to the floor. The living room clock chimed three times.

"Good evening. This is Herb Brown bringing you the six P.M. edition of the news. The Hamilton murder case was wrapped up tonight less than eight hours after the killing occurred. Police, called by neighbors to 8112 North Devon Avenue this afternoon, found the bullet riddled bodies of four men. Forty-five caliber shells found at the scene matched the shell found in Hamilton's office. The body of one of the dead men has been identified as that of Hamilton's murderer by a Borg Building elevator operator and by a woman who rode up to Hamilton's floor with the killer. Identification

in the man's wallet indicated that he was Earl Luke. One of the bodies was that of Larry Marcus, alleged labor racketeer. Authorities theorized that the Hamilton murder may have touched off a feud within the gang.

"In winding up the case, police disclosed that the tape recording-clue, on which so much store had been set, turned out to be a dud. According to Clay Jackson, an electronics repairman, Hamilton had called his shop early this morning saying his machine was jammed. Jackson was just leaving Hamilton's office when the killer arrived. He told police that he repaired the machine and when he left the office the tape on it was running back to the first spool. At the time of the murder, the machine was erasing and not recording."

● ● ●

THIEF IN DISTRESS

When Det. Sgt. Charles D. Grant of Norfolk, Virginia answered the phone he could hardly believe what he heard.

The man on the other end had a complaint. He had cut his hand while breaking into a store and wanted medical attention.

MISSING BOX

Larchmont, New York police are puzzled. What would anyone want with a large "pick-up relay" mail box?

Postman Ralph Anton reported the loss when he arrived at a corner to pick up a load of mail and found the box was not there. He called police. They checked, agreed—it wasn't there. No one knows who would want it—and police haven't found it.

the long wait

BY ARNOLD MARMOR

Why talk about her husband and his accidental death? The man on the couch was alive!

She mashed the cigarette in a glass ash tray, looked at her wristwatch. She went to the record player, switched a key, and Frank Sinatra sang, *Love and Marriage.*

She heard the door open and close. She whirled around.

"Oh," she said. "It's you."

"Yes." A boy stood there, in pajamas and robe. "I couldn't sleep."

"Go back to bed and try."

"I don't want to sleep."

She clenched her fists and advanced toward him. "You should listen to your mother. I said go back to bed."

"All right," he said huskily. "But I won't sleep."

He turned and went out.

She looked at her wristwatch. She turned off the record player. She was jumpy and she knew it.

Another twenty minutes passed before the front door bell rang. She ran to open it.

Tom Gordon was young, dark, and very handsome. "Hello." His teeth were even and white.

"Come on in."

She stepped aside as he entered. She shut and locked the door.

They went into the living room. "A drink?" she said.

"Don't mind if I do."

She built two drinks, gave him one. They sat on a divan and drank. She smelled of jasmine.

There was a piano near a corner of the room and there was a framed picture on top of it. "Who's that?" the young man asked.

"My late husband," Sally French said. "I also have a son. He's ten years old and his name is Mark. What else is there? Oh, yes. I'm thirty-one

and a real blonde. I can't cook but I make good coffee. Would you like a cup?"

"No." He grinned at her. His eyes swept over her. Her full breasts, her slim waist, the round knees that showed under the hem of her dress. "You must be well off. This is a beautiful apartment. Rich looking."

"My husband left a lot of insurance. It was very thoughtful of him, don't you think?"

"Do we have to talk about him?" The young man inched toward her. "There are other things to talk about."

"Like what?" She smiled and put up her face so that her lips were available.

He took full advantage of the opening and kissed her thoroughly.

"Let me catch my breath," she said, after a good three minutes went by.

"Listen, is there a chance the kid might barge in? You know what I mean."

"He'll stay in his room," she said. "He's probably asleep. I don't have any trouble with him."

"That's good. I'd hate to be interrupted." He pulled her to him, kissed her neck. "You smell damn good." He fumbled at the buttons of her dress.

"Not here."

"Where then?"

"Come with me." She got up, took the glasses and the bottle with her. She led the way into her bedroom.

"This is more like it," he said.

"Anything to please." She came into his arms. Willingly, eagerly, hotly.

Later, they smoked cigarettes and talked.

His eyes admired her naked body. Her skin was firm and white.

"How about spending the weekend with me?" he said. "I've got a place in Farmingdale."

"I'll think about it."

"Don't think too long. We were made for each other."

"Were we? You'll tire soon enough."

"Hey, don't say that."

"It's all right." She laughed softly. "If you don't, I will. Affairs like this don't last forever."

"I'm glad you're not the clinging type."

"I'd hate to settle down again with one man. I had enough of that."

"What happened to the hubby?"

"An accident. He shot himself while hunting. But let's not talk about it. There are other things to talk about. Like us, for instance."

"But let's not talk about it. There are other things to talk about. Like us, for instance."

"Good enough." He snaked his arms around her waist. He kissed her mouth. He got her worked up, then he let her pull him down...

She got off the bed later. She put on a robe. He lay there sleeping.

She went into the living room for a fresh bottle. She put ice in a glass and filled it with Scotch. She turned on the record player. Her body relaxed on the divan. She drank Scotch and listened to Brahms.

Mark had kept to his own room. She wondered if he knew what was going on. He wasn't dumb. He was far advanced for his young years. Sometimes she felt that he knew too much.

A shot rang out, jerking her to her feet. She ran into her bedroom. She still had the glass in her hand and liquor spilled as she ran.

Mark was there. He grinned at her. He was in his pajamas.

She looked toward the bed.

There was a bullet hole in Tom Gordon's forehead.

"My God!" Sally French screamed. "What have you done?"

"I shot him," Mark said. "With your gun. I threw it out the window."

"Are you crazy?" She was terrified.

"I shot him the same way you shot my father," Mark said. "I knew you killed him. But I couldn't prove it. Well, this way is just as good." His thin body was stiff with hate. "They'll say you did it. They'll find your gun and they'll say you did it. I wiped off the fingerprints and threw it out the window. I'll say I saw you kill him."

"You little bastard. You'll never get away with a thing like that." Her face, eyes, were frightened.

"What can you tell them? That I did it?" His face was very wise. "They'd laugh at you. I'm ten years old. How could I do a thing like that?" He looked at the dead man. "I was waiting for a chance like this. Ever since you killed dad." He looked at his mother. "I knew I wouldn't have to wait long."

● ● ●

He knew where Ives and Annie were, and what they were doing. They'd be sorry!

office killer

BY RICHARD HARDWICK

"Crenshaw, your fly is open again!"

Aaron Crenshaw's yellow parchment hands went automatically to his crotch, feeling for the buttons. He knew before his hands stopped their downward motion he should have waited, but it was too late. The giggling had begun and he felt the eyes on him and heard Ives' gurgling roar as Ives bent double with laughter and punched Annie, the switchboard girl, in the ribs with a meaty forefinger. The rest just giggled—Maybelle and Vie and Bess, the three stenos—and the new file girl stood there with a self-conscious toothy mouth braying like a jackass. It was Ives, the office manager, and Annie who laughed the loudest and the longest.

Old Crenshaw just sat there, his hands still fumbling for the buttons that had never been unbuttoned, feeling the flush in his face and the tingly sensation that brought tears to his eyes. Two of the stenos turned away in embarrassment for him; but Ives, when he finally recovered from his convulsion, managed to pull his face into a pseudo-serious attitude and growled at Crenshaw, "Where do you think you are? Quit that and get back to work—there's ladies present."

The meaning didn't sink in for a moment and Ives stood there fighting to keep a straight face, until what he'd said hit Crenshaw who then jerked his hands away, pushing them forward on his desk. The ancient hands knocked the ink bottle from its stand and the black liquid ran over a stack of papers and began dripping on the floor. Ives sounded as though he would not recover from this. His face was purple and he was bellowing like a Brahma bull. Annie slapped him on the back as hard as she could, which wasn't very hard because she was almost in hysterics herself. The others were all looking away now and trying to busy themselves to hide their own embarrassment.

Aaron Crenshaw felt the tears streaming up to his tired eyes and he quickly turned and faced the window. The pigeons were pacing back and forth beyond the cold pane of glass on the stone ledge. The laughter faded as if passing into a vacuum. It sounded hollow—distant—eons and light years away as Aaron began talking to the pigeons.

Aaron didn't talk to the pigeons with his voice. If he talked to them that way they could never answer. He talked to them with his mind and that way they talked back. They were his friends, his only friends. They never made fun of him or ridiculed him; he wished that he was one of *them*.

"You better clean up that mess, old man, before Mr. Adams comes in." Crenshaw looked around and Annie was standing beside his desk. "Didn't you hear me calling you? What's the matter, you flipped your trolley?" She dropped a piece of paper on his desk and, loosening the top button of her blouse, poked a hand inside and began adjusting her left breast. "Call this number. I think it's something about the Mason account."

Aaron was staring at the movement beneath Annie's blouse where her hand was still adjusting. A smile slowly spread over her face as she noticed him. "Don't tell me there's still some fire in the old furnace! I'd give a week's pay to see—" At that moment Mr. Adams walked in and Annie quickly withdrew her hand and walked composedly back to her switchboard.

Aaron reached in the bottom drawer of his desk and, taking out the dust rag he kept there, began mopping up the inky mess. Some of the papers were ruined.

But he was still looking at Annie. Then he began to speak to the dirty gray pigeon that was stalking his window ledge like an expectant father, "I know about her. Yes, she can say all she wants trying to taunt me, but I know about her and Ives." The pigeon asked him what he knew about her and Ives and he answered, "I've seen them hang around here plenty when the rest of us go out to lunch. I know what they do and I know where they do it." He chuckled under his breath, "I *saw* them once! Yessir, I came back early just for that reason and I saw them!" The pigeon lost interest, because pigeons aren't interested in anything but eating and laying eggs, and flew away.

"Crenshaw!" Ives bawled across the room. "Have you made up that Rogers report?"

"I haven't had sufficient time yet, Mr. Ives," Crenshaw answered.

"What did you say?" he bawled.

He heard me. I know he heard me. He wants to humble me before the others. Aaron's head spun slightly. He gripped the edge of the desk and then he looked at the desk as if seeing it for the first time. Thirty-five years, and fifteen of them at this same desk in this same corner by this same window. And during the last ten, Harlow Ives had been screaming across the room at him, making him the butt of endless jokes and absurdities. Before that it was... Aaron couldn't remember just then who it had been before Ives, but there had been someone.

The hand fell on his shoulder with jarring effects. "Crenshaw, I was talking to you and I won't put up with your turning away when I'm talking to you. There are plenty of people who would get down on

their knees and thank me for this job and believe me I've thought of making a change..." Ives' voice droned on and on and the beefy hand gripped Aaron Crenshaw's thin shoulder tighter and tighter.

Aaron's teeth rattled and his glasses slipped off the end of his nose and fell to the desk. Ives was shaking him by the shoulder like a dog shakes a rag, "*Goddam it*, you creaking old fossil, you'll listen when I'm talking to you or I'll know the bejesus why!"

The girls rose from their desks as if at a signal and Aaron looked up at the big clock on the wall with the big sweep second hand. The hands were straight up and the second hand had just crossed them. It was lunch hour.

Ives released his grip and walked across the room to his desk and, sitting down, began to shuffle through some papers in hopes that when Mr. Adams came out of his office he would see that Harlow Ives was not one to flee the office simply because it was lunch hour. The girls, except for Annie, had vanished down the corridor to the elevators before the sweep hand reached the bottom of that same stroke. They took turns staying at the switchboard during lunch and today was Annie's turn.

Mr. Adams opened the door of the inner office and stepped from the walnut panelled room, through the waist-high swinging gate, to Ives' desk. "The Rogers report ready, Ives?"

"Not yet, sir. I gave it to Crenshaw and, well..." Looking exasperatedly towards the old man's desk, he held a finger close to his temple and slowly rotated it from the knuckle.

Aaron Crenshaw fumbled in a desk drawer. He heard Ives and out of the corner of his eye he saw the finger. Ives and Mr. Adams were both looking in his direction and he felt the old helplessness rise up in him. Mr. Adams then said something in a low voice to Ives, something Aaron couldn't overhear, and, putting his homburg on, walked out into the corridor.

"I knew you were listening, Crenshaw." Ives' raucous voice bounded across the room. "I knew you were listening and heard what Mr. Adams said. He wants that Rogers report and you're not going to get me in hot water just because Mr. Adams wants to keep you around for old time's sake!"

"But Mr. Ives, you only gave me the assignment this morning...no...I mean yesterday..." Crenshaw's brow furrowed. He couldn't think when it was. Oh God, I can't think when he gave it to me! If he'd just leave me alone—if he'd just leave me alone I could get my work done...

"Lunch hour or no lunch hour, I've put up with damn near as much of your insolence as I'm going to!" Ives was standing over him, towering, portentous.

"Lay offa the old guy, honey," Annie said. "He ain't worth getting steamed up about."

Crenshaw was walking towards the office door. Another four steps and he'd be out in the corridor. Then he'd go to the men's room and then downstairs to the cafeteria. And he'd eat alone and at one o'clock come back up in the elevator and walk down the corridor to the office and sit down at his desk and Ives...Ives would start in on him again. He'd say something to make everybody laugh and then he'd...

Aaron Crenshaw stepped into the corridor. Ives' voice followed him like a bloodhound. "I won't forget this, Crenshaw! You can bet your bottom dollar I won't forget this!"

"Come here, honey. Don't let that old—"

The men's room door closed on the saccharine voice of Annie.

Aaron stepped away from the urinal and washed his hands. A tired, very tired. face looked back at him from the mirror and he ran a comb through the thin gray hair. Before he opened the door to the corridor, he quickly felt to make certain his fly was buttoned.

He went to a table by the big front window and unloaded the tray. Then Aaron Crenshaw sat down to eat, but the fork remained idle beside his plate as he looked out at the sidewalk and street.

Crowds, bundled against the January cold, rushed like ants through the gray sludge. He watched and there wasn't a smiling face in the crowd. Perhaps it was too cold to smile.

The pigeons, miraculously dodging the thousand feet and the rumbling tires, danced about, testing each new piece of paper and poking about in the sludge piles. Aaron mechanically rose from his seat and

walked out of the cafeteria, leaving his food untouched.

The doors closed and the elevator shot skyward, leaving Aaron's tired heart momentarily a floor below.

"Ten!"

Aaron got out and slowly, almost puppet-like, went down the corridor. His feet took him towards Adams & Associates for the ten thousandth time, as if they were sliding down grooves.

The door was closed. He stood silently outside, but no one moved or spoke inside the office. He knew Ives and Annie were in there and it wasn't like Ives not to be talking. When Ives wasn't talking, it could be only one of three things. He was asleep; he was eating; or he was...

Aaron gripped the brass knob, turned it, and stepped into the vacant office. The minute hand on the big wall clock was pointing at the floor. He went into the room almost like a stranger, hesitantly, self-consciously. One of the fluorescent tubes was flickering and buzzing overhead as Aaron walked down the little aisle to his desk by the window. He took a small paper bag from the upper right hand drawer and opened the window very slightly. A whistling blast of frigid air flooded over him. His face was cool as he methodically placed little piles of corn on the stone ledge. The pigeons ate it as fast as he put it out.

"I know," he answered the big gray bird on the end, "it's very cold today." The bird ruffled its feathers and pecked at the golden kernels. Aaron put the bag back in the drawer and took out the long, glistening letter opener. He ran his thumb absently down the blade and touched the point lightly several times.

The supply room door was closed, but he knew the room was occupied. He had come back early before, when Ives and Annie had stayed in the office, and so he knew where they were. Aaron turned and the blast ruffled the straggly gray hair at the back of his neck. It felt as if his friends outside on the high ledge were saying 'go ahead' and were giving him a friendly shove. The door knob of the supply room felt damp in his hand as he turned it, slowly and as noiselessly as he could. Once inside he knew where they were. He knew they were around behind the shelves where the mimeograph table

was and he moved in that direction like an old cat.

Aaron held the letter opener high over his head, point down, and he was standing directly behind them now.

"Mr. Ives."

Ives twitched at the sound of his name and his head came around to stare up at the old man. The eyes were watery and the mouth was half open trying to form the word 'Crenshaw' when the letter opener came down. Aaron had it in both hands now and Ives' eyes suddenly glazed over as it struck just to the left of the spine in the broad back.

The heavy body rolled over as the letter opener was withdrawn and Annie lay there, her mouth frozen open. Her staring eyes followed the letter opener as it descended once more.

Aaron sat at the open window placing the kernels in little rows watching the pigeons peck. The minute hand on the big wall clock was almost straight up again and he heard the elevator doors open down the corridor. The babble of voices burst out and clicking heels echoed up and down the corridor. Aaron raised the window all the way and slipped his coat on. He placed the last of the corn on the sill.

"Now, my friends," he said.

Maybelle was the first to walk through the office door. She screamed and a cloud of pigeons rose from the open window.

Aaron Crenshaw didn't rise, but he was flapping his wings as hard as the next pigeon when he left the high stone ledge.

● ● ●

THREE MEN IN A BAR

Eddie Williams told Detroit police he had met three men in a bar and invited them to his home to watch television. Eddie fell asleep. His visitors must have liked the program real well for when the host awoke at 4:30 he found that they were gone and so was his television set.

I never met Harlan Johnson's wife, but she couldn't have been the paragon he said she was. No woman could be.

On the other hand, Harlan wasn't the paragon his wife might have thought him. I know, because when he was particularly d i s g u s t e d with himself, he let me have a glimpse or two into what he called his "cesspool of a mind."

According to Harlan, his wife Janet thought he was just as wonderful as he thought she was. He always gave the impression of being a little humble because Providence had let something as nice as Janet happen to him.

George Swift spoiled the little pink cloud Harlan lived on. George, and Harlan's own cesspool of a mind. When a man strays from a wife like Janet to a cheap tramp like Sally, you can't put all the blame on the guy who introduced them.

The three of us had a rather peculiar relationship. We became close enough friends to confide our intimate thoughts to each other, without ever getting to know each other well. We never saw each other anywhere, except at the Men's Bar on Forty-second Street.

What brought us together originally was simply that all three of us worked till midnight, and we all fell into the habit of stopping at the Men's Bar for an after-work drink. Harlan Johnson managed a movie house just off Times

BY
RICHARD
DEMING

the cesspool

Her one request: "Treat me like a tramp."

Square, George Swift worked the four to midnight trick as headwaiter in a restaurant frequented by theatrical people, and I worked the same trick as a police reporter. We were all in our early thirties, all had been married, but Harlan was the only one still working at it.

Probably what first drew us together was the mutual recognition that we were usually the only fully-sober midnight customers at the Men's Bar. By midnight most tavern customers are pretty well on the way to hangovers, but as we'd all just gotten through work, we'd come in cold sober.

At first it was just polite nods of recognition when we met at the bar, then a little casual conversation, finally mutual introductions and a nightly habit of matching for drinks. We never did reach the point of going out together anywhere other than the Men's Bar.

Nevertheless, we became pretty firm friends.

George Swift was the core of the trio. Tall and skinny and full of nervous energy, he always knew the latest jokes and, because of his nightly contacts with theatrical people, always had up-to-the-minute inside dope on everything going on in town. Harlan Johnson was a big, blond, quiet man with glasses, a listener rather than a talker. As I'm not much of a talker myself, we spent most of our nightly half hour together listening to George.

That's how we first heard of Sally. George knew all about her within twenty-four hours of her appearance in town.

"Boy, have they got something hot over at the Silk and Satin," he announced as we awaited our drinks.

"What's the Silk and Satin?" Harlan asked.

George gave him a wide-eyed look. "You were born in this town and never heard of the Silk and Satin?"

I said, "It's a cat house, Harlan."

George raised a supercilious eyebrow. "That's like calling the Stork Club a saloon."

"Okay," I said. "So it's high-class. What's it got that's so hot?"

"A new gal. Who likes her work."

Both Harlan and I looked puzzled.

"I mean really likes it," George explained. "Not just puts on an act. Sally's her name. They say she's insatiable."

Our drinks arrived then, interrupting the conversation. We

matched to see who paid. I won the honor.

After we'd all tried preliminary sips, Harlan set his drink on the bar and regarded George thoughtfully through his glasses. He asked, "What's so strange about a woman in that business liking her work?"

George said, "Know anything at all about abnormal psychology?"

Harlan shook his head.

"Well, it takes a peculiar psychology for a woman to become a prostitute. Studies by Kinsey and other psychologists indicate that very few pros have any passion at all. A large percentage have schizo tendencies. That is, they live in a world of fantasy and have the ability to dissociate their minds entirely from what they're doing. Nymphos hardly ever go into the business. They just go around giving it away."

While George was no dunce, this dissertation was a little too glib to come from his own reading. I guessed he was repeating something he'd heard one of his customers say. Probably the same customer who'd told him about Sally.

When Harlan had absorbed this, he said, "I can see how that would be. A prostitute would almost have to shut her mind to reality to be able to live with herself. But how do you know this woman isn't just putting on a good act?"

"Testimony by an expert. Tony Severn was over to the Silk and Satin last night."

If Tony Severn was the source of George's information, it was probably accurate, I thought. Severn was a fading matinee idol and a notorious satyr. Probably no one in town was better qualified to judge female passion.

"She's not only hotter'n a dollar pistol," George said. "According to Tony she's a living doll, and intelligent on top of it all."

"That'll be the day you see an intelligent pro," I said. "Now I know it's an act."

"No fooling," George told us. "Tony says her grammar is perfect and she talks like an educated woman. I don't think a put-on act would fool him."

"I'll have to look this wonder over," I said. "Soon as I save up a hundred bucks."

"Is that what it costs?" Harlan asked, a little awed.

"Yeah," George said. "But you get a lot for your money. All you can drink, all the time you want with a woman, or

even several women, if you can handle that much. The girls don't rush you, because they're not on a percentage basis. They're all on straight salary; so they don't care whether they amuse a dozen guys during the evening, or just one. I think I'll dig into the sock for a hundred and see how good this Sally really is. Or maybe we could all go over together and match odd man to see who pays."

"Not me," Harlan told him. "With a wife like Janet at home, what do I need with that kind of thing?"

The subject of Sally didn't come up again until the following Monday. Then, shortly after we met at the bar, George said, "Well, I squandered my century note over the week end. Holy smokes, what a woman!"

"Sally?" Harlan asked.

George nodded. "It's no act. That gal enjoys every minute of it. Cute as a button too. If I'd met her anywhere else, but where I did, I think I might fall for her."

Harlan was looking at George with a strange half-disapproving, half-eager expression. "What's she like, George?" he asked.

"Around twenty-five. Maybe a little older. I never could guess a woman's age. Average height. Five three or four. Dark, wavy hair, and an absolutely flawless body. Firm as a sixteen-year-old's, without a sag in it. And a kind of hot, sultry look on her face."

"I mean, what's she like—you know..." Harlan's voice trickled off and he turned crimson.

George looked surprised. "Why, Harlan, you dirty old man!" he said with simulated shock. "You want a vicarious love affair. Janet will beat your brains out if she ever reads your mind."

"Go to hell," Harlan said embarrassedly. "With a girl like Janet, I don't need vicarious love affairs."

I don't think George Swift suspected how accurately he'd put his finger on Harlan's mental quirk when he made his joshing remark. I discovered it the next night when Harlan and I met at the Men's Bar as usual. George wasn't there because Sunday and Tuesday were his nights off.

When we had our drinks, Harlan suggested we sit in one

of the booths because he wanted to talk.

After we were settled, he fidgeted with his glass for a time, finally said, "Pete, do you know anything about this abnormal p s y c h o lo g y George mentioned one night?"

"Probably as much as he does," I said. "George kind of talks off the top of his mind. I've read a couple of books. Why?"

"I was wondering if I ought to see a psychiatrist."

I looked at him in surprise. "For what? You're the most normal guy I know."

"Not in my thoughts," he said. "Sometimes I think I have a cesspool of a mind. I've been wanting to talk this over with someone, but I couldn't possibly tell Janet. You mind listening?"

"Of course not. Go ahead."

"Well, you know how much I think of Janet. I guess we have what people call an ideal marriage. We're both still in love after six years."

"I know," I said. "I kind of envy you."

"I—I suppose we have a normal sex relationship," he said hesitantly. "I mean, we're compatible enough and all that. But you know you can't do all the things you'd secretly like to do with a woman you love and respect."

"What kind of things?"

"Well, treat her rough. I mean, she's your wife, and you can't treat a wife like a whore."

"Why not, if you want to?" I asked.

"Because you just can't," he said impatiently. "And lately I've been having mental fantasies about other women."

"Specific ones?" I asked.

"No. Well, yes, except I don't know what she looks like. She takes d i f f e r e n t shapes in my mind. This Sally, George talks about."

"I see," I said. "And that bothers you?"

"It seems abnormal. Here I'm married to a girl I love, yet I get tingly all over every time I think of that common prostitute. And I don't even know her."

"If it makes you feel any better," I said. "I've had a few fantasies about Sally myself. And I've never seen her either.

"You have?" he asked, surprised and a little relieved. Then he looked discouraged

again. "But you're not in love with another woman."

"Look," I said. "Mind if I ask you a couple of personal questions?"

"Why no. Go ahead."

"What kind of early sex training did you have? I mean, how did you first learn boys and girls were different?"

He looked puzzled. "From the other kids, I guess. Don't most people?"

"Yes. unfortunately. Complete with giggles and the suggestion that there's something dirty and nasty about a completely natural function. Ever get a sex lecture from your parents?"

He thought back. "Dad talked to me once or twice. Mainly in an attempt to scare me into behaving, I think. They were moral lectures rather than information sessions."

"That's average," I said a little bitterly. "I got the same deal from my dad. You're just a normal product of the times. As a kid, you had it pounded into your head that sex was something dirty and shameful. Subconsciously sex and dirt are so associated in your mind, you can't fully enjoy a clean, healthy relationship. You want it a little nasty. That's why happily married men go to cat houses. Because subconsciously they link sex and degradation."

He thought this over, finally asked, "You think that's my trouble?"

"It's the trouble of ninety percent of the people walking around," I said. "I wasn't psychoanalyzing you; I was quoting from books I've read."

"Then you think my fantasies about this Sally are entirely normal?"

"No," I said. "But you're in the majority. Our national attitude toward sex is so loused up by the puritanical idea that the best way to instruct kids about sex is to scare hell out of them, there probably isn't one adult in ten with a really healthy mind. I spent a month in Paris once. And you know what I used to do? Deliberately look for women who couldn't understand English. So that while we were making love, I could say all the filthy words I knew. I'm too inhibited to say them to a woman who could understand, see, even if I thought she wouldn't object. Intellectually I know my mind is the same kind of cesspool you think yours is, but I can't shake the emotional attitudes which were fixed in me as a

child. And neither can you."

"Well, I don't intend to give in to mine," Harlan said. "Thanks a lot, Pete. I feel a little better for having talked this out."

Sally didn't come back into our conversation until Friday night, when Harlan suddenly asked George if he'd been back to see her.

"You think I'm a millionaire?" George asked. "At a hundred a crack, about twice a year is my speed."

I said, "I've been thinking of taking a look, George. How do I get in the Silk and Satin?"

A little importantly, George pulled from his pocket a small card advertising the restaurant where he worked, scrawled on the back, "Please admit bearer. George Swift."

Handing me the card, he said, "You'll have to hit it on your night off to see Sally. She works the same trick we do. Four P.M. to midnight."

Harlan was eyeing the card in my hand fascinatedly. George asked, "You want an introduction too?"

"No, no," Harlan said hurriedly. "I never go in those places."

I used the card on my next night off, the following Wednesday. The Silk and Satin was an ordinary-looking two-story house up in the Eighties. From the outside it appeared to be just another residence, but inside it was elaborately draped and carpeted to look like an oriental harem.

I had no trouble getting in. A matronly-looking woman in evening dress answered my ring, briefly examined the card and graciously accepted five twenty-dollar bills.

"Just go on in," she said, nodding toward an archway leading to what seemed to be the main lounge.

This was a room about twenty feet square furnished with nothing to sit on but low ottomans and cushions. There was some other furniture, however. A long table loaded with hors d'oeuvres, a small bar against one wall, a huge radio phonograph playing soft music, and a number of low cocktail tables strategically placed within reaching distance of the cushions and ottomans.

The walls of the room were solidly draped with red silk, and the indirect lighting was just bright enough to see clear-

ly without losing the glamorous effect of low lights.

Several men, some in evening clothes, some merely in business suits such as mine, lolled on cushions with drinks in their hands. Each had a slim female companion, dressed in the filmy attire of a harem slave: transparent nylon pantaloons bloused at the ankles, bare feet and a practically nonexistent brassiere consisting of two small circles of rhinestone-studded metal and a bit of golden cord. A surplus of three similarly-attired girls chatted together near the radio-phonograph.

As I entered the room, the three girls glanced up, and a slim redhead left the group to come over to me.

When she got close enough to smile a greeting, I said, "I don't exactly understand the procedure here. This is my first visit."

"There isn't any formal procedure," she said pleasantly. "If you're in no hurry, why don't you have a drink before you do anything else?"

I said, "I was looking for a girl called Sally."

"Most first-time visitors are," the redhead said without rancor. "She's busy now, but should be free before long. What do you drink?"

I told her rye and water. She mixed two at the small bar and brought them over. We found a couple of cushions near a cocktail table and reclined.

"My name's Sara," the redhead said.

"I'm Pete," I told her. "Do you always drink the same thing the customer orders?"

"Unless it's something weird like straight gin. Good luck, Pete."

We raised our glasses and drank. It tasted like bonded rye.

One of the male customers rose from his cushion, left the girl he was talking to and went across the room to a blonde who was sitting with another man. When he said something to her, the blonde looked inquiringly at the man she had been entertaining, who only shrugged. Rising, the blonde accompanied the first man toward a stairway visible through an arch at the end of the room.

I raised my eyebrows at Sara.

"You can pick any girl you want any time you're ready," she explained. "I'll have to leave you if someone wants me. Unless you decide you do."

She was a cute kid, but I'd come to see Sally. I decided to wait.

During the next fifteen minutes two more couples strolled off toward the stairway, another male customer came in and one of the remaining two surplus girls joined him at the far side of the room. Then a man and woman came down the stairs.

The man immediately crossed to the bar and began to mix himself a drink, but the woman stopped in the archway and ran her eyes over every man in the room. She didn't even glance at the other women.

The redheaded Sara said, "There she is," then raised her voice and called, "Oh, Sally!"

Instantly Sally came over. She was a slim, deliciously curved brunette somewhere between twenty-five and thirty, with still, delicately carved features. While not precisely beautiful, there was an aura of eager vitality about her which made her almost overpoweringly feminine. At the same time, she somehow managed to give an impression of naive freshness combined with genteel breeding. Dressed in something other than her harem attire, you might have taken her for a younger member of some country club set.

I couldn't detect what George Swift had described as a hot, sultry look on her face, but she did have a sort of still, waiting expression, as though she hoped I might reach out and touch her.

I had risen, and Sara, still in a seated position, said, "This is Pete, Sally. He wanted to meet you."

Sally looked at me steadily, without smiling and without saying anything. Sara rose languorously, gave me a tiny wave of goodby and returned to the radio-phonograph.

I said, "Can I buy you a drink, Sally?"

Slowly her eyes moved over me from head to foot. "Do you want to take time for a drink?"

I said, "Not particularly. I was just being considerate. I thought you might like a recess."

"I only work till midnight," she said. "And it's nearly ten now. Let's not waste time on drinks."

I began to see what George had meant about Sally liking her work. There probably wasn't another girl in the place who wouldn't have been glad

for an excuse to dally over a drink instead of going upstairs. But Sally, just having returned from a session with another man, was impatient to be gone again.

I killed the rest of my drink and set the glass on the cocktail table.

Upstairs the oriental motif continued to be carried out. The room to which she took me was furnished with a huge sleeping cushion, about seven feet square and a foot thick, instead of a bed. A couple of ottomans, a long, low cocktail table and two large wall mirrors were the only other furnishings. Except for the inevitable silken drapes, purple in this case.

"Do you like light?" Sally asked.

"Do you?" I countered.

She nodded. "If you don't mind. Don't you think it adds something?"

A small lamp on the cocktail table already lighted the room dimly. Sally switched on a bright overhead light. Then she took my hand and led me to the sleeping cushion.

For a moment we merely sat side-by-side holding hands. She looked at me sidewise, almost timidly.

"Would you do me a favor?" she asked in a low voice.

"Probably. What?"

"Treat me like what I am. Make me crawl and kiss your feet and feel like the lowest tramp in town."

"All right," I said.

Her lips parted and I could feel her hand begin to tremble in mine. "Will you really?" she asked.

"If you like rough treatment, you came to the right boy," I said.

Freeing my hand from hers, I wound it into her hair, jerked back her head and kissed her with all the savagery in me.

As Thursday was Harlan Johnson's night off, only George and I met at the Men's Bar the next night. I told George I'd been to see Sally, but didn't happen to mention it again on either Friday or Saturday.

Sunday, one of George's two nights off, Harlan and I were standing at the bar together when it occurred to me he knew nothing of my experience.

I said casually, "I guess I didn't tell you that I made the Silk and Satin the other night."

For a moment Harlan stood

very still. Then he said, "Sally?"

"Yeah," I said. "George didn't exaggerate her a bit."

For a time Harlan kept looking at me, then looked away, as though fighting some battle with himself. Presently his shoulders seemed to sag a little and he gave me a sort of beseeching, apologetic look.

"Can I ask you a kind of favor, Pete?"

"Sure," I said.

"Maybe we'd better sit in a booth."

He led the way to a booth out of earshot of the bar, nervously played with his drink after we were seated.

"This is going to sound kind of silly," he said eventually. "But I wish you'd tell me all about it."

I looked at him. "Why?"

His glass moved in faster and wider circles. Without looking at me, he said, "I guess George was right when he said I wanted a vicarious love affair. I can't help my cesspool of a mind. I have to know about it, Pete. What you said to each other, and what you did, and whether she made little moaning noises. All the gory details."

The circling glass stopped moving and he looked me straight in the face. "Now tell me to go to hell if you want."

It was a little while before I made any answer at all. Finally, I said, "It sounds like a kind of teen-age stunt. At least I haven't described a bedroom scene to a pal since I got out of my teens. But maybe it will be good therapy for whatever's ailing you."

So I described everything that happened from the time I entered the front door of the Silk and Satin until I left sometime after midnight. When I finished, Harlan was staring glassily at his forgotten drink and breathing as though he'd just climbed a flight of stairs.

I said, "I'm not proud of the way I acted. But I guess I got rid of a few inhibitions."

Harlan shook himself from his trance. "When are you going back?"

"I'm like George," I told him. "At a hundred bucks a night, about twice a year is my limit."

"Suppose—suppose I paid half of it?"

I frowned at him. "What would you get out of it?"

Not looking at me, he said in a bare whisper, "You'd have to promise to tell me every

thing that happened again. Every little detail."

"Hey," I said, beginning to get a little alarmed at his mental state. "You're letting this thing become an obsession. I'm not sure what you're doing isn't some kind of perversion."

"Would you if I paid half, Pete?"

"No," I said. "This thing is getting out of hand. I'm not going to be middleman in some screwy love affair between you and a phantom. You'd better kill your inhibitions by going to see the gal yourself."

He shook his head violently. "I'm not going to cheat on Janet."

"Then take what's bothering you out on her," I suggested. "Maybe she'd like it. Maybe she's as inhibited as you are, and would welcome a caveman approach."

"Don't be idiotic," he said impatiently. "Janet's a *nice* girl. You couldn't treat a respectable woman like that."

"Suit yourself," I said, "but I'm not pampering your obsession any more. I'm sorry I told you what I did tonight."

He looked a little embarrassed. "I shouldn't have made that silly suggestion, Pete," he said. "Forget it, will you? Let's have another drink."

We didn't discuss Sally any more until the following Tuesday, when George Swift again had a night off. I think Harlan deliberately waited until then to bring her up so that we'd be alone.

He started in a roundabout way by telling me his vacation began June ninth, which was only a week away.

"We're not going to do much," he said. "Just drive out to Fire Island a few times."

"Well, that's as nice a vacation spot as you'll find anywhere," I told him. "You don't have to drive halfway across the country to enjoy a vacation."

He said, "I'd like to make it a kind of second honeymoon. We spent our first one at Fire Island, you know. Maybe a honeymoon atmosphere would knock these thoughts about Sally out of my mind."

"You still letting her bother you?"

He began moving his glass in a little circle on the bar. "You know, Pete, I think maybe if I could actually picture her, I could block her out of my mind. Not knowing what she

looks like, she takes so many forms, I'd have to keep my mind permanently blank not to think about her. If I knew, I could just refuse to think about that one mental image."

"You mean you're going to see her?"

"Not inside," he said. "She gets off work at midnight, doesn't she? I thought maybe I could stand across the street from the Silk and Satin some night and see her when she comes out."

"A whole shift of girls finish at midnight. You wouldn't know which was Sally."

In a diffident tone he said, "I thought maybe you'd be willing to go along and point her out."

I frowned at him. "We both work till midnight. By the time we got clear up there, she'd be long gone."

"Tomorrow's your night off," he said. "I could arrange to get off early and meet you."

"Look, Harlan, I only get one night a week, and I don't want to spend it standing across the street from the Silk and Satin. Even for a friend."

He was silent for a time. Finally, he said, "This is important to me, Pete. I'd even be willing to pay your way for an evening there. You could walk out with her at midnight, so I'd know which girl she was."

I shook my head. "I suggested seeing her home last time, and she wouldn't have any part of it. She said it's a house policy that the girls never see a customer outside of working hours."

"She wouldn't object to your just walking out with her and leaving her in front of the place, would she?"

"I suppose not," I said dubiously.

The thought of a free evening at the Silk and Satin was attractive, and if it was that important to Harlan, I didn't see any reason I shouldn't go along.

"It's all right with me if you want to spend your money," I told him. "But we're not having any of this vicarious stuff afterward."

"No, no," he assured me. "All I want is to see what she looks like."

Pulling out his wallet, he counted out a hundred dollars. I knew he didn't ordinarily carry that much with him, which led me to believe the idea hadn't been a spur-of-the-moment one, but that he'd come

prepared to buy my co-operation.

My evening at the Silk and Satin was much the same as the first, except that I got around to Sally later than I had before. I timed things to take her upstairs about eleven, so that I'd be the last customer she saw. Afterward I lingered in the main lounge until she and several other girls came down dressed in street clothes.

As they all started for the front door, I fell in at Sally's side.

"I told you I don't let anyone see me home," she said quickly.

"I wasn't planning to," I told her. "I just happen to be leaving too. I'll walk you to the corner."

She didn't object to that, and we went out together. I held back a little, holding the door open for the other girls so that they could reach the street and disperse before Sally and I went down the steps.

As we reached the sidewalk, I glanced around in an attempt to locate Harlan. I wouldn't have spotted him if I hadn't been looking for him, for he stood in the shadow of a doorway across the street. I couldn't make out his face, but by his size and the glint of his glasses, I knew it was Harlan.

I also knew he was able to get a good look at Sally, because there was a street light immediately in front of the house.

Sally permitted me to walk her as far as the nearest corner, then stopped and said in a firm voice, "Good-night, Pete."

I grinned at her, tipped my hat and said, "Night, Sally."

I watched the movement of her hips as she walked away, then turned and went back to speak to Harlan. But he hadn't waited. The doorway was empty when I got there.

That was the last time I ever saw Harlan Johnson. My next news of him came from a report on the police blotter.

I didn't expect to see him at the Men's Bar on Thursday, as that was his regular night off. Friday George and I wondered where he was, but it didn't occur to us anything might be wrong. Saturday, during my routine check of the police blotter, I ran across a missing report on a Mrs. Janet Johnson. The report had been filed by her husband, Harlan Johnson.

I tried to phone Harlan at the movie house, but a woman there told me he had started his vacation a few days earlier than planned because he was so upset over his wife's disappearance. Looking up his home number in the book, I tried there, but got no answer.

Two days later the real story broke. Janet Johnson's body was found floating in the Hudson River. I didn't get the story assignment because the news broke at nine A.M., and one of the boys on the day trick took it.

But I followed the story. An autopsy disclosed that she'd been raped and then strangled, presumably while on her way home from a neighborhood movie she was believed to have attended the night she disappeared.

The killer was never apprehended. Dozens of suspects were picked up and grilled, most of them known sex offenders, but the police couldn't pin the crime on anyone. Eventually, the story simply died and was forgotten.

George and I discussed whether or not we ought to attend the funeral, but since neither of us had ever met Janet, we finally settled on sending a large spray in both our names.

Harlan Johnson never returned to his job at the theater. I phoned it again two weeks after the funeral and was informed he'd taken a job managing a theater in a small town upstate.

It was another six months before I saved up enough money to revisit the Silk and Satin. It was to be my last visit, because the place wasn't the same. Sally was gone.

According to the redheaded Sara, Sally hadn't even given any notice. She'd just walked out after work on the night of June third, and never showed up again.

It so happened that that was the night I walked her to the corner, so that Harlan Johnson could get a look at her.

● ● ●

a time for dying

A Novelette

BY GEORGE LANGE

Leo was the brains of the outfit; Nick, his strong arm. To get any place, I had to kill both of them.

I sat on the beach—if you could call it that—and watched Vardis swimming out in the lake. Her arms flashed in the sunlight as they knifed in and out of the water, bringing her back to where I waited on the blanket. A little while ago she had waded into the water wearing a black bikini. Now, when she waded out again, she was carrying the top half of it in her hand.

My jaws fell apart, I guess, because she laughed as she ran up. Then she sat down on her own blanket, spread out next to mine.

"What big eyes you have, Grandma," she said as she reached up and peeled the rubber cap off her head. Her dark hair showered around the white shoulders. I raised my eyes to her face—finally. Her lips were curled in a smile that was half gay, half mocking.

She stretched out full length on the blanket and her fingers toyed with the fastener on what was left of the bikini. She said, "Johnny?" and there was invitation in her voice.

I glanced nervously over my shoulder. We were in an out-of-the-way cove, and a hill rose steeply behind us. There were a few trees on it, but not enough to hide the water's edge where our blankets were spread. And just beyond the top of the hill lay the highway. Anybody might stop along the road, walk over and take in the scenery below. Did I want Vardis to be the most interesting part of the scenery—Vardis and me?

I decided I did. I lunged for her but she rolled aside like a cat, and I ended up on my belly with a mouth full of sand. By the time I had spit the sand out, she had wrapped

the narrow black bra over her breasts and was calmly tying it in the back. She gave me a thin smile.

"Damn it, Vardis," I said, "you shouldn't lead a guy on that way if you don't intend to shell out."

"I'll shell out, Johnny, when the time is right."

I said, "When will that be, Vardis?"

"When will what be, Johnny-boy?"

"When will the time be right?"

From somewhere she fished up sun-glasses and slipped them on. She leaned on one elbow and gazed out over the lake. The breeze played with the fringes of her hair. My eyes traced the lines of her body, from the graceful curve of her shoulders to her red lacquered toes. I studied her, and a fire burned bright inside me.

But she answered, "When Leo's not around any more," and the fire went out.

It would be one of those cold days in July they talk about when Leo wouldn't be around any more. Leo Antoni, the guy who had the city in his pocket. He owned everything, and what he didn't own he controlled. The extortion rackets and the labor union shakedowns; the pin-ball machines and the juke-boxes; the football lotteries; the bookies, the pimps and the pushers. Any place a fast buck was to be had, Leo's hand was out to grab it. The fact that all of this was illegal didn't bother him, either. He owned the politicians, too, including the D.A. and the chief of police. You could lay a bet with any bookie on any street corner; you could buy reefers in any tavern, and the red-light houses didn't even bother to pull down the shades at night. The gambling casinos were open twenty-four hours a day, and the only people who couldn't get in were...well, I can't think of anybody who couldn't get in.

Leo rode herd on this operation with a very small mob, small as mobs go. It was a tight organization, efficient as an automated factory, and it pumped so much money into the till that not even Leo knew any more what the take really was. Considering that only a few years before he'd just been a muscle boy working the picket lines, I had to admit that the guy had done all right for himself.

And I wasn't doing so bad,

either. I had wandered into this midwestern town, on the lam out of L.A., while Antoni was in the middle of a war with a two-bit hoodlum by the name of Harrigan who bossed a sort of bush-league syndicate that was trying to run things and didn't quite know how. It didn't take me long to see that when the war was over Harrigan would be out and Antoni would be in. When one of Leo's boys got in front of one of Harrigan's slugs, the big boy was glad to take me on as a replacement.

"If it don't work out," Leo said, at the time, "I can always stick you in a barrel of concrete and drop you in the river."

It did work out, though. It worked out better than either Leo or I had expected.

After Harrigan disappeared from the scene and Leo had established himself, he sent me, with a couple of other guys, to persuade the shopkeepers around town to install his pin ball machines and his juke boxes. Along with these items we also peddled a little insurance. For a certain weekly premium we could practically guarantee a delicatessen owner, for instance, that he wouldn't come down some day and find his store smashed up—or go home some night and find his family in a bad way. At first, some of our "prospects," I guess you'd call them that, ran to the cops, but when they found that the cops weren't interested—there had to be an actual crime committed, they were told, not just the threat of a crime, before the police could get into the picture—they soon came around. One or two who didn't, wished later that they had.

I didn't much care for this end of the business. It put a guy out in the street too much, made him too well known around town. And there was always the chance that some joker with more guts than sense would get his belly full one fine day and pay off in bullets instead of money.

But I wasn't a leg man for long. Leo moved me around to different jobs, and before a year was out I had become his right hand man. I issued routine orders, made minor decisions and kept things rolling while Leo handled the money, made the deals with the City Hall boys and thought up new rackets. We operated out of an office in back of the Club Carioca, a posh night spot which

was Leo's official and only legitimate business enterprise. I use the words legitimate and business enterprise very loosely, because the place was a clip joint pure and simple, but in spite of that it was still a money losing proposition. Leo had the best food, the best music and the best entertainment; so even a capacity crowd wasn't enough to cover the tab on all this quality. But it didn't really matter, because the swankiest casino in the city was upstairs. That's where the big money changed hands—out of the suckers' hands and into Leo's. It was enough to pay the Carioca's expenses ten times over and then some.

Every night you'd see Leo one place or the other. Even if you didn't know him you could hardly miss him. He was well over six feet tall, big-boned and padded with two hundred and fifty pounds of flabby blubber. His head was slightly bullet shaped, going bald on top, with dark sleepy-looking eyes under bushy eye-brows. His nose was wide and flat. He was ugly, Christ knows, and you might hate his guts, but yet there was something about him that commanded a certain amount of respect.

Maybe that something was Nick Mariano. Nick was Leo's personal and private bodyguard. He wasn't actually a member of the organization at all. I mean, he had no part in any of our dealings. But wherever Leo was, Nick was there too. In all the time I knew the two of them I never saw them separated except once. Nick was a wiry little Sicilian and strictly a rat from the word go, but he was the fastest man with a gun I'd ever seen anywhere.

I might have had ideas, in the slot I was in, of pushing on to better things. I was number two man, and as far as the rest of the mob was concerned, they would have worked for me as well as they would for Leo—maybe better, because I'd have given them a better shake than he did. But this Mariano made it just about impossible to nudge Leo out of the way. You'd have to kill not one, but both of them. This would take some doing, as I found out one time when a crazy saloonkeeper, tired of paying protection money, came up to the office gunning for the boss. He crashed through the door, gun in hand, but before he could line up Leo's bulk in his sights, Nick had drawn and fired—

and the poor bastard had a slug in his heart.

2.

Yes, I might have had ideas, but I didn't. Up until Vardis started making a play for me, it hadn't bothered me much. She was Leo's girl, of course. Nothing ever satisfied Leo but the best, and she was it in the woman department. I knew nothing for sure about her past; she was there when I came in. I heard a lot of stuff: she'd been a singer, she'd been a strip-tease artist, she'd been a society dame whose family threw her out, she'd been this, she'd been that. Nobody seemed to know what the hell she'd really been. But it didn't make any difference, because now she was Leo's and that's all any of the rest of us had to know.

He had set her up in a fancy penthouse apartment—with an extra key for himself. Naturally, all the guys got a little hot-eyed when they looked at Vardis. It just wasn't possible to look at her and not get that way. But, nobody ever dreamed of making a pitch for her because of Leo. And when I say nobody, that includes me.

It was only just recently that the picture had changed. I remember how it started.

I was in the office one day running down the list of guys who were getting behind in their insurance payments. Leo came in, with Nick like a shadow behind him. They sat down and we batted the breeze for awhile; then Leo hunched his chair up close to the desk.

"I'm taking the six o'clock plane for Detroit," he said.

I'd learned a long time ago not to ask questions. I waited.

"There's a deal cooking up there," he went on, "and I'm going up and see if I can't get us a piece of it."

"Okay, Leo."

"Now, look. The doll don't know anything about this—" he always called Vardis the doll—"and she don't need to know, at least not until I'm on the plane. Got it?"

"Got it."

"I won't be with her tonight, so I want her to have this."

He reached in his pocket and brought out a box wrapped in white paper and tied with a red ribbon. He shoved it across the desk to me. I picked it up, not-

ing that it didn't weigh a lot.

"It's a diamond bracelet, Johnny," Leo explained. "Set me back twelve grand. I want you to deliver it to her. I could send it over with Joe or Lefty or Red, or any of the others, but I can't trust those muggs not to get ideas."

He looked at me. "About the bracelet, I mean," he said. "Ideas like taking off with it."

Did he read my mind? I was thinking of the ideas a guy might have about taking off with Vardis. Bracelets you could always get. Looking at Leo's face, I decided he wasn't considering anything like that at all. But Nick now, that was something else again. The cold, killer eyes stared at me, and there was a glitter in them just before they went expressionless again. But I said, "I'll take care of it, Leo," and then he told me when to get there with the bracelet, and after that they left.

At five minutes to eight that evening I parked in front of Vardis' apartment house. I went through the lobby and into the elevator and rode up to the end of the line, the twenty-seventh floor. I went around behind the shaft and up one flight of stairs, then down the corridor to a solid oak door. That was her door. It had to be, because the only other one on the floor was a steel door opposite, and that was marked "ELEVATOR MACHINE ROOM." I pressed the buzzer button, but the door and the walls were soundproof, and I heard nothing inside. I waited, then I pressed it again. I was just about to knock on the door when it swung open silently. Vardis stood inside.

She wore a long pale yellow robe. That was all, just the robe. The fabric was not quite transparent, but it was the next thing to it, and she had it pulled tightly around her hips and waist and tied in the front with a braided belt. The top had a couple of buttons, but she had neglected to push them through the buttonholes. The V of the opening dropped almost to the belt line. If she would have moved her shoulders in just the right way, the whole top of the robe would have slipped off her body. I wondered if she always received Leo in this way.

Her eyebrows raised a little when she saw it wasn't the boss who had come knocking, and she drew her robe closed and held it with her hand. But at

the same time she smiled and said, "Johnny! What a nice surprise."

"Leo went out of town for a couple days," I said.

I saw her eyes narrow to slits and the line of her jaw go hard, but it passed in an instant, and I went on to say, "He couldn't make it over himself, so he sent me to give you this."

I handed over the package. She took it and smiled and said, "Well. Come in."

She stepped to one side and I went through the door. The soft light of the living room lay like an amber sheen over the expensive contemporary furnishings. To the right a window looked out on the city, now only disembodied lights, twinkling back at the stars. To the left a door opened into the bedroom. It was dark in there. Near that door was another, leading to a tiny kitchenette, where you could mix a cocktail or brew a pot of coffee and fry bacon and eggs, maybe. but that was about all. I estimated the rent on these diggings at a couple grand a month, at the very least. Then I looked at Vardis again, and saw how the light turned the green of her eyes to blue, and wrapped the firm curves of her ripe young body with a golden halo, and I figured it was worth it.

Vardis watched me, and a brief smile played at the corners of her lips. She knew what I was thinking.

"So Leo ran out on me," she said, her tone unexcited.

"He'll be back in a couple of days."

She turned her attention to the package. She fumbled with the ribbon, and I stepped forward with my pocketknife and cut it. Our hands touched momentarily, and hers were soft and very cool—too cool to be heating up my blood the way they were. I stepped back. She stripped off the paper and sprung open the box. She draped the bracelet over her finger and looked at it flashing in the yellow light. Because of the beauty of the thing, I whistled. She smiled, then tossed the bracelet almost contemptuously on the table.

"Did Leo say where he was going?" Vardis asked.

"Well...I..."

"You can tell me, Johnny," she coaxed.

I guessed I could at that. Leo said not to until he was on the plane. But that had been two hours ago.

"He went to Detroit. Something about a deal he wants in on."

Vardis walked across the room and shook a cigarette out of a pack on the lamp table. She lit it thoughtfully, then in a tone that was only a little more than a whisper she said, "The fool. They'll take him, Johnny."

"I don't know what you mean, Vardis."

After a slight pause she said, "I know you don't, Johnny."

Then, with a sudden change of mood, she laughed and said, "Well, come on out to the kitchen with me and we'll fix a drink."

"I don't know, Vardis. I ought to be getting back to the club."

"There's nothing doing at the club for an hour yet."

"I know, but—"

"You don't have to be afraid of me. I won't eat you."

"It isn't that."

"I don't have much company up here in my ivory tower. Give me a chance to play the gracious hostess."

I shrugged and followed her out to the kitchen, watching her swaying hips. How could you say no to something like that? She pulled out bottles, glasses, shaker and all the rest of it. She handed me a silver handled ice pick.

"Be a darling and get the ice, will you? You'll have to chip the tray out with this. There's something wrong with the refrigerator."

I got the ice. like she asked me to, and helped her mix the cocktails, after which she sent me back to the living room while she poured them. She brought the glasses in on a silver tray, and sat down on a chair opposite me. I raised my glass.

"To Leo," I said.

She didn't answer. She swung one leg over the other, and the robe was tight against her thigh as she sipped her drink. After a minute she said, "Leo used good judgement."

"He sure did. That thing'll knock your eye out a mile away."

"What? Oh, you mean the bracelet. I was talking about you, Johnny."

"Me? I don't get it."

"Leo moved you up next to himself in the chain of command, didn't he?"

"Well, yes, I guess he did, but—"

"There were others, you

know, that he might have selected."

"I don't doubt that. And I don't doubt, either, that those others hate my guts."

"No, they don't. That's just why Leo picked you. The others are all local boys, and they accept you because you're from out of town. If one of them was in your place, there'd be nothing but jealousy and arguments. The organization would fall apart."

"I don't think it's as bad as all that."

"Leo needs you, Johnny. More than you'll ever need him."

"I'm afraid you're way out in left field."

She shrugged and let the matter drop. So did I. That kind of chatter made me nervous. I didn't know whether she was trying to lure me into admitting to bigger ambitions than I really had or not. I didn't know what she was up to.

We sat there and had a couple more drinks and talked about other things. I'd never had many words with this doll up to now, and I don't remember much of what we talked about, but I liked the sound of her voice, and I liked the way her robe spread open every time she reached for her glass, and the way her eyes were warm when she looked at me. I had to keep telling myself to take it easy, that this could get me into big trouble. In spite of the inviting sag of her robe and the way she came close to me when she picked up the empties, I didn't make any passes. This wasn't something to rush into.

Then the telephone rang. It was Leo calling from Detroit. The minute I found that out I started to get up and leave, but Vardis waved me back with her hand, and I sat down again. She talked to Leo about the bracelet, and how beautiful it was and how much she adored it. Her voice was like honey, but her eyes were looking across the room and there was nothing soft or warm about them. And still with the same chilly gaze, she pouted to Leo about his going off without letting her know, and she ended up by pleading with him to be careful. But the plea sounded more like a warning.

I heard her say, "Yes, he brought it... No, he left right away... Of course not, Leo, what would he be hanging

around here for?... Don't be silly."

She said good-bye and hung up, then came across the room, reading the question in my eyes.

"Leo asked about you," she said.

"So I gathered."

"He wanted to know if you were here."

"I know. I'm wondering if he'll believe what you told him."

Vardis shrugged. "What difference does it make? What can he prove?"

An awful thought suddenly occurred to me. I rushed over to the window and looked down into the street.

"Suppose he's got a stakeout on your front door?"

She laughed "Don't worry. Leo trusts me."

But did he trust me? And should I trust Vardis? The thing was getting pretty mixed up. I figured the best thing for me to do was to get the hell out of there and back to the club where I belonged. I went to the door, and Vardis came with me.

"I like you, Johnny," she said, her lips close to my ear.

But I wasn't in the mood any more. "Okay, Vardis," I said. "I'll see you."

"Soon, Johnny, soon."

All the way down in the elevator, all the way back to the club, I remembered her face and the way she smiled and the warm throb of her voice. And I remembered her eyes, and how different they were when she talked to me from what they'd been when she had talked on the phone to Leo.

3.

When I got back to the club office I eased myself into a chair and lit a cigarette. It was getting along toward the time when the customers started drifting into the club, and from there to the casino upstairs. There wasn't much for me to do. The boys out in front usually kept things pretty well under control. It was a quiet evening, and I had a lot of time to sit and think. I thought mostly about Vardis. What kind of a pitch was it, anyway? When she was with Leo, which was the way I'd always seen her up until this evening, you'd never suspect she'd be anything but one hundred percent loyal to him. Yet the way she'd acted when I was over there, th

things she'd said—and the things she didn't say—well, that was another thing. I got the impression she didn't really have much use for Leo, and that she was only nice to him because she could take advantage of his generosity. But why was she nice to me? Because she really went for me? It was a pleasant idea and I kicked it around the back of my head for awhile, but I never quite believed it. On the other hand, if it was just a whim of hers it might get her fouled up. It might get me fouled up, too, and that I didn't like.

A day or so later Leo and Nick came back. Neither one said anything, but from the way Leo acted, and from the sour puss on him I figured the Detroit deal had fallen through.

In the days that followed I saw Vardis two or three times, but she was always in Leo's company. We exchanged the usual small talk, and that was about all, except that I thought her eyes softened a little when she looked at me, and once or twice her fingers lay a moment on my coat sleeve. And always, I noticed, when she smiled at Leo, there was something icy in her eyes.

One night, a week or so after I had visited Vardis' apartment, Leo, Nick and I were sitting around the club office, yakking about one thing and another. Vardis was there too, sitting on the couch next to Leo. Every once in a while he'd put his big hairy hand on her thigh and give a little squeeze. I watched her face for some sign of either pleasure or disgust, but there was nothing. Then I noticed that Nick was watching her, too. Was she unable to show pleasure and afraid to show her revulsion? Was that it?

Leo was called out in front, and he left with Nick in tow. I'd been sitting back of the desk, mainly because that was the only place left to sit, and now Vardis came over and leaned across, opposite me, with her forearms on the top of the desk and her back arched. I couldn't help but see down her dress—way down.

"Why don't you come and see me any more, Johnny?" The husky voice was only a shade above a whisper.

"That would be real cozy, wouldn't it?" I said. "You and Leo and me. And Nick, too, no doubt. What would we do, play bridge?"

"You're laughing at me, Johnny,."

"Damn right I'm laughing."

"Do you really want to see me, Johnny-O?"

"What difference would it make?"

"Listen. There's a little restaurant out on Highway 8. It's about thirty miles out, and nobody ever goes there. Nobody that you and I know, I mean. Leo doesn't even know it exists. I drive out there once in a while just to get away from—things. The food's good and the surroundings are beautiful."

"So?"

"I happen to know that Leo will be tied up with a couple politicians tomorrow afternoon. They've reserved a private dining room at the Claymore Hotel."

"So?"

"So why don't you meet me—out at that place on Highway 8?"

"I don't know, Vardis," I hesitated.

She leaned over a little farther. Her face was close to mine, and I could smell the fragrance of her. I swallowed hard a couple of times.

"Please, Johnny-O."

"What's the name of the place?" I said quietly.

So the next day I was there, at the appointed time. It was everything Vardis said it was, and then some. The building sat back quite a distance from the highway. You parked in a lot off to the side, screened by trees and shrubbery, and you walked up a gravel path to the entrance. You could see the highway from there, but it was too far away for you to be able to recognize anybody driving by—or to be recognized. Inside, the dining room was to the back, and you looked out through enormous picture windows over a wooded hill, and beyond that there was a wide blue lake. From the restaurant a set of stone steps led down the hill to cabanas at the bottom, and for a fee of a buck you could change down there and go swimming, or you could rent a motor boat for three dollars an hour.

We didn't swim the first time out. We had lunch; then we went out in the back and sat on the grass under a shade tree and held hands and talked about nothing in particular. Once, her lips swung close to mine, and parted a little, but when I moved to kiss her she

fell away and turned her head. Right after that she said we'd better go.

But we came back. Twice more for lunch and once to swim. The place didn't get much of a play on weekday afternoons in the early summer. I was glad of it, of course, because Vardis and I had the place pretty much to ourselves.

The second time we came out to swim, Vardis suggested we rent the boat and go out around the big hill that jutted fifty yards into the water. That's how we found the scrubby little beach and the cove out of sight of everything. That's how it happened that she could come out of the water carrying her halter in her hand.

So now we lay on the beach blowing smoke against the wind, with the sun warming our bodies. But there was nothing warm inside—not for me. When Leo's not around any more, she had said.

I flipped the butt in the direction of the water and started to get up.

"Let's go," I said.

She grabbed me by the hand.

"No, Johnny, not yet."

"What's the use of dragging it out, Vardis?"

"You give up too easily."

"Let's face it. There's about as much chance of Leo not being around as there is of a snowstorm in hell."

"What's he got, Johnny, that you haven't got?"

"Well, let's tick them off. One: Influence."

"At the City Hall, you mean? That gang's for sale to the highest bidder."

"Okay. Two: Money enough to outbid anybody else. Especially me."

"Where does he get it? Through the organization, doesn't he? They make it for him."

"Yeah, but he's the head of the organization. That's number three."

"A bunch of punks. Dumb clucks that couldn't stay out of jail for ten minutes if they were on their own."

"Maybe so, maybe not. But anyway, number four: Leo's the brains of the outfit."

"That's a laugh. Leo couldn't think his way out of a room with a wide open door in it."

I sat up at that one. Vardis was staring out across the water, and there was a bitter twist to her lips as if she were thinking of some dirty trick that life had played on her.

"It's the truth, Johnny," she said. "Leo's just a big dumb wop who happened to be in the right place at the right time. Harrigan's gang was falling apart of its own weight. They wouldn't pay off the right guys with enough money. Everybody was too damn greedy, from Harrigan on down the line. They were fighting among themselves with their right hands and trying to fight off City Hall with their left. Leo Antoni came up with a big deal for the politicians and they pulled the carpet out from under Harrigan. As soon as the Irishman's mob found out what was going on, half of them went over to Leo. After that, Harrigan was finished. And Leo had the guts to push him all the way. That's all Leo's got, Johnny, all he ever had. Guts."

"Number five," I said.

"And I'm not sure it's guts, even at that. Maybe it's only that he's too stupid to know that what he's doing can't be done."

"But what about the operation? You have to admit he's figured out some smart angles."

"Somebody else has figured them out for him, Johnny-O."

"Yeah? Who?"

"Me."

She spit the word out, as if the whole thing made her sick to her stomach. I could feel my eyes bugging out. Could she be serious? Did she expect me to swallow a whopper like that?

She saw that I certainly didn't believe it. She smiled. Then she laid it out for me. When it was all told, I knew it was the truth.

Now I understood a lot of things. I understood why she always knew where Leo was going to be and what he'd be doing. I understood why the Detroit deal had fallen through —because Leo had gone out on his own, without her knowledge, even—and hadn't been able to get to first base. And I understood why he was so tenderly solicitous toward her. It wasn't just because she was a beautiful doll. There were plenty of beautiful dolls around. It was because he needed her, although she was clever enough never to let him think that she knew it, too.

"Well," I said, after a time, "there's still a sixth thing Leo's got that I haven't got."

"What's that?"

"You."

She reached around behind me and eased a cigarette out

of the pack. I sparked the lighter for her and watched her as she opened her lips and let the smoke drift out. She took a drag or two in silence, then she said, "If Leo were out of the picture, Johnny, you'd take over without much argument from the rest of them. Then everything that's his would be yours. Including me."

I didn't say anything, and after a moment she went on.

"In a couple of years we'd have our pile made; enough money to chuck the whole thing and get out. We could go away somewhere, Johnny, South America or Australia—someplace far from here. We could buy a farm or a plantation or a sheep ranch or something and spend the rest of our days in peace and quiet, like human beings. We could forget about this kind of a life where we're either hunting or being hunted. Would you like to spend the rest of your days with me, Johnny-boy?"

"Hell yes, Vardis, You know I would. But I thought you liked the bright lights and the big city and all that."

"Oh, it's all right, but it doesn't last. The excitement wears off after you've done the same things for years. I'm not a kid any more, Johnny. It won't be too many more years and my looks will be gone, and then...well, then I will have had it."

"I think you'll always be beautiful, Vardis."

"But that's not all," she said, ignoring my remark. "You know and I know that sooner or later the city's going to get its bellyfull of being pushed around by a bunch of cheap hoodlums. Look at Galveston, Texas. Look at Phoenix City. It always happens. There's a change of administration, and the show's over. We're out on our butts, Johnny—those of us who aren't sent up. Afterwards another gang moves in, and it's the same story over again."

"I guess you're right."

"Look. In a little over two years there'll be an election. They're starting to put the heat on already. By the time that two years rolls around nobody'll be able to hold back the tide. If we time it right, we can throw in our cards and get out of the game while we're still ahead, just before the roof falls in. But we've got to start now, Johnny."

"Why not throw in the cards

right away? Why wait and take a chance on getting burned? Let the roof fall in on Leo."

"We haven't got enough money. And we can't get enough by playing second fiddle. You got to be on top of the heap; you got to control things."

She paused and stuck her cigarette in the sand. Then she looked at me and the hard lines of her jaw softened. She reached out and put her hand in mine.

"That's not the real reason, though," she said. "The money isn't that important. I'd live in a cave with you, Johnny, if it had to be. But Leo's that crazy jealous that he'd hunt us down and kill us."

"So what's the answer?"

I knew what the answer was, but I backed away from it. I didn't want to admit it, even to myself, because deep down I was afraid of Leo. And, being afraid, I couldn't bring myself to say it. She could, though.

"We'll have to kill *him*, Johnny-O."

Just like that. Now that she had brought it out into the open it didn't seem so frightening any more. I realized that the idea had been kicking around in my subconscious ever since the night she'd opened the door for me when I delivered the bracelet. I had wanted her from that moment on, but I'd never had the guts to face what it meant to want her. Some gal, this Vardis! She had brains and guts, too. I thought of Leo and I had to laugh at how he would flounder, like a fish thrown up on the beach, if she wasn't around to spell everything out for him.

Already, I realized, I had accepted the idea of killing him!

But there was another thing to get straight. I lay on my back with my hands clasped under my head and closed my eyes against the brightness of the sky.

"Why don't you just take off for this sheep ranch of yours with Leo?" I asked her. "Why wait for me when he's already got the dough?"

"Leo!" The way she said it, it was a dirty word.

"You don't really like Leo, do you?"

"I hate him!" Her voice was bitter. "I hate everything about him. The way his clammy hands are pawing me all the time. The stale cigar smell on his breath. The way he drops

his underwear all over the floor; the way he uses the toilet with the bathroom door standing open. Oh, God, Johnny, I get sick, actually sick, every time I hear his key in the lock, and I think about what's coming. He's a slob, Johnny, two hundred and fifty pounds of lard, and I'm sick to death of him."

Then her tone changed and grew rose petal soft, and she edged over closer to me and stroked my arms and my chest with her fingers.

"But, you, Johnny," she whispered, "you're nice, and you treat me with consideration. Your skin is clean and under it I can feel rippling muscles. You've got some education, and some refinement, Johnny, and I'm not sure what the word love means, but I think I love you very much."

She had moved closer, and her lips were almost touching my ear.

"Promise me we'll kill him, Johnny."

"Sure, Vardis, sure!" I exclaimed, for right then I would have promised her anything.

She flung herself on me violently. Her arms clung to me and her body writhed, and her lips ate hungrily at mine. Something exploded in my head, and there were bright colored lights everywhere, and with wild impatience I ripped the bikini from her body....

4.

The sun was dropping fast when we rolled up our blankets and started back to the cabanas. Later, after we had showered and dressed, we went up to the parking lot and sat in Vardis' car. It began to dawn on me that the wild promise I'd made might not be so easy to carry out.

"This idea of knocking Leo off," I said, "would be a hell of a lot more attractive if he didn't have Nick Mariano sticking to him all the time, like an extra arm."

"Nick's a problem, all right," Vardis admitted, "but I've been thinking, Johnny, and I believe I know how we can get around that."

"Yeah? How?"

"Well, there's one place Leo goes that Nick doesn't go."

"I'd like to know where that is. I never see Leo, but I see Nick, too. They even go to the can together."

"But they don't go to my bedroom together."

"Well, now that you mention it, I guess they wouldn't. But I'll bet Nick's not very far away."

"You're right. He waits outside the door, in the corridor. He even has a little folding stool he brings along to sit on while he's waiting. Sometimes he has to wait quite a while."

I thought about that. "That means I could take them one at a time," I said. "If I can get past Nick, Leo wouldn't give me much trouble. He probably wouldn't have his own gun handy, and if I—"

Vardis laughed. "He doesn't carry a gun, Johnny-O. Not when he comes to see me."

"Yeah. Then the only problem we'd have is getting the bodies out of the building.

"That, and getting past Nick."

"That's right. That's where we've got to take a gamble."

"Look, Johnny, just you let me work out the details. Don't worry about it. I'll let you know when everything's ready. Okay?"

"Well...okay, then."

I was relieved. Knowing what I knew now, I had a lot of confidence in her planning ability.

I kissed her and got out of her car. She said, "See you around—at the club," and drove away.

It was three nights later before she showed. I watched the two of them, Vardis and Leo. She hardly gave me so much as a casual glance It was an odd feeling, knowing what there was between us, to see that fat slob's fingers stroking her bare shoulders, or trailing the line of her thigh. It was all I could do, a couple times there, to keep from whipping out my gun and blasting his guts open. I would have done it, too, and taken Vardis and made a run for it, except for Nick. He would have burned me down before I could get my hand out of my coat.

Thinking about it, though, I felt a little sorry for Leo. He was living on borrowed time, living in a fool's paradise just so long as we let him live. and no longer. Best of all, I found that I wasn't afraid of him anymore. I could even take a calm view of his going up to Vardis' apartment as he probably would tonight. Let the poor bastard have his fling, like a condemned man getting his last meal. I didn't begrudge him that.

And Nick? My finger itched to pull the trigger that would send a slug crashing into that sneering face. There was a guy whose guts I really hated.

Along about midnight, the three of them, Leo, Nick and Vardis, got up to leave.

"Go home early, Johnny," Vardis whispered hurriedly, when she got me alone for a minute. "I'll call you at your room. Sometime between one and three in the morning."

"Is it all set?"

"It's all set. This is it, Johnny."

Then she was gone. I felt my heartbeat speed up, and until I went home, an hour later, I was chain smoking—a thing I'd never done before in my life.

In my room I finished off the rest of the pack. Then I walked up and down for awhile. I sat on the bed and picked up the newspaper. I read the same paragraph a dozen times and still didn't know what I was reading. I checked my gun every few minutes. I looked at my watch —it must have been a thousand times, and not once could I have told you what time it was. Then, at seven minutes after two the phone rang. I snatched up the handset and yelled, "Hello!"

"Easy, Johnny." Vardis' voice was just above a whisper. "Now listen. Come over to my apartment, but don't park in front of the door. Stay around the corner somewhere. Then come on up in the elevator. When you get up to the top, lock the elevator doors open. You'll find a little catch behind the door, to the right. When the doors are open you pull that catch out and push the end down in a slot you'll find there. Got it?"

"Got it."

"Come on up the steps. You remember how to get to my door, don't you?"

"Yes, but won't Nick—"

"He'll be there, waiting in front of the door. For God's sake, Johnny, don't reach for you gun. Whatever you do, don't reach for your gun, do you hear?"

"I hear."

"Nick will challenge you. Tell him that Leo sent for you. He won't believe you, of course. Tell him to knock on the door and ask Leo himself. He may give you an argument, but you can convince him that he'd better make sure of what he's doing before ignoring the

boss' orders. Got it?"

"Got it."

"Okay, Johnny, that's all."

"That's all? But Vardis, I—"

"Get here as quick as you can, but don't get picked up for speeding, and don't run any red lights."

"But, Vardis..."

It was too late. She had already hung up.

5.

Nick was there, and he had the gun in his hand. When I stepped around the corner his eyebrows shot up, but the gun didn't move because it was pointed right at my middle.

"Hello, Nick," I said in a casual voice.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

"Leo sent for me."

"To come here? What are you trying to sell, me, Johnny? Nobody meets the boss here."

"That's what he said. Isn't this Vardis' apartment?"

"As if you didn't know. Hardly the place for a business meeting, is it?"

"Why don't you ask Leo?"

"Are you nuts? I can't butt in on him now."

"He said it was urgent, Nick, to get here quick."

"He didn't say anything to me about it."

"I can't help that. But you'd better knock on the door and tell him I'm here, or you might have him sore at you."

"I'll take a chance on that. If you're snowing me and I knock on the door he'll be a hell of a lot sorer."

"Listen, Nick, you can ignore the boss' orders if you want to, but I was told to come over, and I'm going in."

I moved toward the door, but he stepped in front of it.

"Watch it, Johnny. I'd hate to shoot you without Leo's say-so, but I will if you force me to."

"Okay, Nick," I said. "You knock on the door. I'll take the responsibility."

He hesitated, watching me uncertainly. At last he said, "Okay, Johnny, but if there's trouble...watch out."

"It'll be my funeral, Nick, not yours."

He put his left hand behind him and tapped lightly on the wood. In a few seconds the door swung open, and Vardis looked out.

"Yes?" she said, then seeing me in the middle of the corri-

dor she said, "Hello, Johnny. Leo's waiting for you."

Nick stepped to one side, watching us both, keeping his gun hand loose and ready to move in any direction.

"You'd better come in, too, Nick," Vardis said. I noticed that she wore the same yellow robe. It was tied at the waist and buttoned all the way up. Her hands were in the pockets, and she stood there looking at us with impassive eyes.

Nick motioned with his gun that I was to go first. I went in and he followed and the three of us stood just inside the door. With her shoulder, Vardis pushed the door shut. "In the bedroom," she said.

I started walking across the living room, sensing Nick's gun a foot or two away from my back. This guy didn't take any chances. I was about half way to the bedroom door when I heard the gun go off behind me.

I spun around. Nick was standing perfectly still and he was still holding the gun. But there was a surprised look on his face and as I stared at him a little trickle of blood started from his nostril and slanted down to the corner of his mouth. Then I saw the red bubble on top of his head, and, as he fell at my feet, the powder blackened hole behind the ear. I raised my eyes. Vardis was holding a small automatic, and a little smoke was still drifting out of its muzzle.

"That's how you shoot a man with a small caliber gun, Johnny," she said. "At close range, behind the ear."

She knelt and examined Nick's body.

"I see the bullet went all the way through," she muttered. "We'll have to find it before we leave. I've already picked up the brass cartridge."

She tossed the automatic into a chair and got to her feet. I suddenly remembered Leo. Leo! Where the hell was Leo? Vardis read the frantic question in my eyes. She tilted her head toward the bedroom. I charged through the door, tugging my gun out as I ran.

That wasn't necessary. Leo's naked body lay on the bed, partly on his stomach, partly on his side. And in his back, sticking straight out, was the silver handle of the ice pick I'd used that other night to chip cubes out of a tray. The shaft was deep in his body, and I knew the point had gone through his heart. There was

no blood. It was as neat a job as I had ever seen.

I looked at Vardis. "You?" I asked.

She nodded, smiling.

I took my handkerchief out and wiped the sweat off my forehead. Vardis lit a cigarette; then she started talking, the words tumbling out rapid fire.

"Here's the deal, Johnny. I've got two big laundry bags in the closet. We'll put these stiffs in and you'll have to carry them down to my car in the basement garage. The attendant's gone for the night. Put the bags in the trunk. I've got some concrete blocks and a roll of baling wire in the back seat. We'll drive out to the river. There's a motor launch there that I leased the other day. We'll go down the river to where it's plenty wide and plenty deep. You tie on the blocks and dump the bags over the side."

I was only half listening to her. Because while she talked she pulled the knot out of the belt around her waist. The front of the robe fell open. Then she began pulling clothes out of a dresser drawer, and as she moved the robe swung around loosely, now wrapping itself around her legs, now falling away from her.

There was another distraction—one not so pleasant. I stared at Leo's body and at the calm look on his face.

"Vardis?" I said.

"Yes, Johnny-O?"

"It just registered in my slow brain that Leo didn't come up here to sleep."

"That's right, Johnny."

"Then how did you get that ice pick in his back?"

"I had it hidden under the pillow, Johnny-boy."

"You mean you shivved him while—?"

She was smiling that same old thin smile, that teasing smile that had always fascinated me. But now it only made me sick. I had no particular objection to murder, when murder was necessary. But only a completely ruthless woman could have planned and executed a booby trap like this one.

For the first time I saw what Vardis really was. She had been the real operator, the power behind the throne that Leo sat on. She had manipulated him like a puppet on a string, and then when he had had some idea of his own, and she saw that her hold over him was beginning to slip, she put

him out of the picture. Sure, the Detroit deal was a flop, but the next one might not be. Sooner or later, if only by blind luck, something would have clicked, and Leo wouldn't need her any more. She couldn't allow that to happen.

All that crud she'd handed me about a sheep ranch in Australia was a lot of stuff. Or maybe not. The point was, she had used Leo until she couldn't use him any more and now she was setting it up to use me.

On some soft Australian night, would my joyride be rudely interrupted with an ice pick in the back? Could I ever have her with that terrible question mark between us? With my face in a pillow, could I ever feel sure that there wasn't an ice pick under it or in her hand?

She was r e a d i n g my thoughts, because now she shrugged off the robe completetely and let it fall around her feet. She came over very close to me.

"When we come back, Johnny-O," she whispered, "we'll have a time of forgetting. It'll be so nice... with you."

I looked at her a long time in silence. I wanted to run, out of the apartment, out of the building, out of the city, but knowing Vardis as I did now I knew there was no running from her. I was trapped. I'd never know when I was going to get it—in the back...

● ● ●

PAID IN ADVANCE

A man walked into an unguarded Jersey City trucking concern, opened the unlocked safe, took an estimated $10,000 payroll from it and ambled out.

As he was leaving, he met a company official who questioned him.

"Just looking for a job," he said. When told there were no vacancies, he left—with the $10,000.

HITCHCOCK, the master of suspense!

Read Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, for the same kind of crime and terror stories that have won Mr. Hitchcock renown in movies and T. V. 144 pages of thrilling entertainment in each issue. Ask for your copy today—Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine.

Presenting new, exciting stories each month—all as different as Hitchcock himself

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

Look for me on your newsstand NOW!

THERE'S A TRULY EPIC EVENT ON YOUR NEWSSTAND

NOW!

For Those Who Crave The Finest In Hard-Hitting Adventure Stories We Are Proud To Present The Newest, Most Stimulating Publication In The True Action Field...

EPIC